

SPEECH BY MR RONNIE KASRILS, MP, MINISTER OF WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY AT THE OPENING OF THE WELGEDACHT WASTEWATER CARE WORKS OF THE EAST RAND WATER CARE COMPANY LIMITED (ERWAT) IN SPRINGS, GAUTENG, ON TUESDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2003

Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests, it is a pleasure to be here today to open this wastewater plant.

I read a comment recently, from a 7-year-old South African boy called Monde, which said:
"Water is precious. Do not waste it. If it is dirty make it clean and give the clean water to the poor people."

It consequently gives me great pride here today to attend an event which is enabling us to do just that. In fact I want to point out up-front that the example of the East Rand Water Care companies role (ERWAT) in treating wastewater here on the East Rand serves as a trailblazer for our country of the way we must go if we are to win the battle of dealing with water pollution and ensuring the protection of water quality in our river systems. We are faced with the growing problem of contamination and pollution, particularly in the municipal areas of our country from the Vaal to the Hartebeespoort, from the Umlazi to the Berg River in the Western Cape. The ERWAT company will be ten years old next year. It was created as a public entity to service the municipalities on the East Rand. It has managed its affairs in an exemplary manner, through its excellent co-operation with the municipalities such as EKURHULENI, which manages to collect service payment from its rate-payers and in turn pays its bills to ERWAT for the services rendered. In opening this Welgedacht Wastewater Works here today, I call on the municipalities of our country and our Water Providers and Authorities to closely study the ERWAT model which offers us the solution to ensuring quality water for our people and environment. I pledge my Department's full support and co-operation for blue ribbon successes such as this. May I add what a wonderful achievement this is in the run up to the celebrations of ten years of democracy next year.

This is wise advice from the next generation, and I am glad to see that his sage advice is being taken seriously by ERWAT. As you know South Africa is a water scarce country, and we need to be very active in our management of water resources in order to ensure that there is enough water for all our needs, social, economic and environmental. We must also ensure that the water quality is good enough. This is a challenge that we must harness all the forces of co-operative government to achieve. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, provincial government and local government, will all have to work together to protect and conserve our precious water resources. At the moment we are doing well in some areas and not so well in others.

In a recent front-page article in the press it was claimed that millions of litres of human waste is running down to the Vaal River, threatening the health of 10 million people. You will be glad to know that concrete proposals have been produced for a solution. I also welcome the intervention plan produced by Rand Water and Emfuleni Municipality and hope that this plan or a similar arrangement can be implemented soon. We will continue to work with the relevant authorities to press for a speedy decision and resolution of the problem.

However, this case is merely an example of what can go wrong if proper wastewater treatment is not in place. The underlying causes of pollution of the water resource from urban areas lie with the way the waste, sanitation and stormwater services are delivered, operated and maintained by the local authority, and the way these services are used, or sometimes misused, by people.

My Department has the mandate to protect South Africa's water resources, but local authorities have the mandate for, and the expertise required to, manage waste, sanitation and stormwater services. More importantly, securing the financial resources required to effectively manage these services lie within local authorities' ability to recover these costs from consumers.

Effective protection of the water quality impacts of urban areas therefore relies on co-operative government, and can only be realized by joint action between my Department, local government and the affected communities. It is critical that all parties recognize their joint accountabilities and responsibilities and that we make co-operative government work in the interests of the people.

To this end, Cabinet recently approved a Strategic Framework for Water Services in South Africa.

Strategic framework for water services

In 1994 the Water Supply and Sanitation Policy White Paper was published. This White Paper played a key part in creating an enabling policy framework for water services delivery, with a particular focus on meeting the backlog of basic water supply and sanitation. Thus it focused on the establishment of a new national water services function and on the role of the National Government in assuming a direct delivery function to provide basic water and sanitation services rapidly to people living primarily in rural areas. Since 1994 the context has changed significantly and Cabinet has thus approved the Strategic Framework for Water Services. The Strategic Framework provides a comprehensive summary of policy with respect to the water services sector in South Africa and sets out a strategic framework for its implementation over the next ten years.

It provides a comprehensive framework for the water services sector. My Department will become sector leader, supporter and regulator rather than a water services operator. Water services authorities will take over the full responsibility for the delivery of water services. In order to support this, current funding arrangements for water services infrastructure will be consolidated into the Municipal Infrastructure Grant. A capacity building grant will enable us to build the capacity of local government to deliver sustainable, affordable and efficient services.

Very importantly, the strategic framework sets out the vision that we must work towards continually improving the levels of service that we deliver to our people. We would like to see not only the provision of communal taps, but ultimately the provision of household connections for the majority of South Africans. This is a long term target, but we have shown over the past few years that we can move mountains if we set our minds to it, and I believe that an ambitious goal will challenge us to aspire to ever greater heights.

Another ambitious, but crucial goal, is that of sustainability of water and sanitation services. We must ensure that local authorities budget sufficiently to maintain, rehabilitate and upgrade the water services infrastructure. Once the pipes are underground, we tend to forget about them, but we forget at our peril. After a time the pipes begin to crack, leaks develop, water is lost to the system and sewage leakages occur for example. Maintaining an effective water supply and sanitation service requires sustainable funding on the local government budget. In this regard, it is gratifying to see the investment that has been made in the Welgedacht Waste Water Care Works and associated infrastructure.

Waste Discharge Charge System

At the same time, my Department is investigating the introduction of a system of charging for effluent discharges. The application of the polluter pays principle implies that those that discharge polluted water into our water resources must pay.

The Waste Discharge Charge System will introduce financial and economic instruments, aimed at:
 Promoting sustainable development and efficient utilisation of water resources;
 promoting the internalisation of environmental costs by impactors;
 recovering some of the costs imposed by the discharge or disposal of waste (financial charge); and
 creating financial incentives to encourage the optimal utilisation of water resources and the reduction in waste (economic charge).

Black Economic Empowerment

Before I close, let me congratulate ERWAT in having used a black empowerment consortium to do the contract work on this project. South Africa is a remarkable country. Nearly ten years ago now, we produced, from the hearts and minds of ordinary South Africans, a miracle that took us away from potential disaster, to the democracy that we now live in. That was a great moment of transition. But that was only the beginning of a process, not the end. The challenge now faces all of us South Africans to see that process through to its logical end – equality for all, black and white, female and male, able-bodied and disabled, young and old.

A key element of that equality comes from access to economic opportunities. The very foundation of democracy is the right of all people to vote – but it is not sufficient. It is also necessary to ensure that people who were previously excluded from the mainstream economy of South Africa can take their rightful place. There are many opportunities, in the development of public infrastructure, for making this happen, and this project is a good example. I would hope, however, that there will also be a focus on empowerment of women in projects such as this in future.

In closure, let me remind you that we must look after this earth, and its water, not only for the present generation, but for the future generations. We hold this earth and its water in trust not only for ourselves, but for our children too, and for our children's children.

I am delighted, therefore, to be here at the opening today, and I hope that municipalities and industry throughout South Africa will aspire after effective protection of the water quality impacts of urban areas, and look at this project and learning from it as we move forward to a cleaner, less polluted and more sustainable future in South Africa.

I thank you.