

Launch of the Aqua-Enviro Youth Summit Award Ceremony
Speech by Ms TR Mabudafhasi, Deputy Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Gauteng
29 June 2009

All the Youth present here today
Educators and Learners
The Media houses
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today is a special day!

In 1976, the youth of this country took to the streets in protest against Bantu Education– an education system that denied black people quality education and was established to limit the potential of our people. Today government recognises the importance of education as a means to give the youth a better future; rather the struggle for the youth today is about the reconstruction of our society and creating a better life for all.

Over the recent years, in fact since 1996, the former Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (now Department of Water and Environmental Affairs) has been driving the implementation of various awareness and education campaigns aimed at increasing literacy levels around natural resource management issues; water quality monitoring; health and hygiene, among others. These were coordinated under various umbrellas, including the 2020 Vision for Water and Sanitation Education Programme (2020 Vision) through its competitions the South African Youth Water Prize and Baswa-le-Meetse; Aqua-Enduro, and many others.

This year, consistent with Government's Programme of Action, we are integrating and consolidating all Departmental initiatives aimed at water education. And we have particularly chosen June, the Youth Month, whose historical significance we all know, to launch this inaugural Water and Environmental Youth Summit. Commencing this year, annually, this event will be convened to, as this year's theme of the recently launched National Youth Development Agency states, "**Celebrate a Vibrant Youth Voice**"

Any democracy, including ours, must strive to ensure that while our children have certain rights, this goes hand in hand with responsibilities. Hence the need to engage children from a young age to be aware of their environment and natural resources, and to care for and protect the same.

The words of the Senegalese ecologist, Dr Baba Dioum in 1968, perhaps best illustrates why education is a critical response to achieving behavioral change to issues of natural resource management

*"In the end we will conserve only what we love; We will love only what we understand and; We will understand only what we have been **taught**."*

Therefore the *Aqua-Enviro Youth Summit* is part of my Department's bigger programme of educating our future generations about the importance of preserving and protecting our natural water resources.

In view of the fact that the summit will (a) cover initiatives done on educational youth programmes from different units such as Water use efficiency, working for water, Forestry, Sanitation (b) recognise the National Youth month and (c) recognise Environmental Month, there has been consensus that the title of the summit should be representative hence "**Aqua-Enviro Youth Summit**".

This Summit is a week long intensive education programme that addresses water, careers, skills and environmental issues. A range of activities will be undertaken throughout the week. It is opportune at this time to highlight some of the significant milestones we seek to attain:

In addition to the media conference and the launch of the summit that is being today the activities that will be conducted during the week will include:

- National Competitions throughout the week and winners will be announced and awarded on the last day, Friday, 03 July 2009.
- Exhibition of all the branches of the Department as well as the key sector partners to showcase the Department and sector partners' functions and career opportunities. The exhibition is targeted at external schools/learners – grades eight to eleven who are not catered for in current Departmental programmes. A total number of five to seven thousand learners are expected to visit the exhibition hall during the week.
- Evening sessions for the week are also planned, where learners are expected to share their different programmes with their peers.
- Workshops, educational tours, lectures and commemorating June 16, 1976 are also planned for the week

The Summit encompasses Competition in various categories, namely,

Baswa le Meetse Awards (Youth in Water, initially celebrated during March): which is aimed at recognizing the role of youth in awareness campaigns related to water and sanitation, promotes health and hygiene, stimulate the interest of youth in water related careers, and promotes cultural diversity. This competition is targeted at grade six learners, who convey health and hygiene messages through arts medium i.e. drama, traditional music, poetry, praise singing and posters. We are excited and are looking forward to the creativity that has always been presented by this project and the skill that has been demonstrated in communicating these messages through arts and culture.

South African Youth Water Prize (initially celebrated during August): To all participants present here today we are looking forward to the innovative and research projects and am proud of being on the global calendar through this project. We have been doing this project in collaboration with Sweden to encourage active participation of youth in water resource management, sanitation and forestry. We engage learners between grade nine and eleven in identifying problems and develop inventions to solve them.

The national adjudication panel selects the best project that competes in the Annual International Competition held in Sweden. We however seek to ensure a broader participation at lower levels of our education system.

Aqua-Enduro (initially celebrated during October): is a project that revolves around World Water Monitoring Day which is on the 18th of October each year. Issues of Drinking Water Quality are the core business of the programme. The aim is to develop interest in learners who are between grade eight and eleven in order for them to pursue careers in the Water Sector and thereby address the skills shortages in the Water Sector. The winners will be awarded bursaries. I am told that this week will give them more exposure to water infrastructure through excursions.

Invasive Alien Plant Educational Programme (Initially celebrated during October): focuses on raising awareness about the impact of Invasive Alien species on our national resources. The programme allows for activities that seek to transfer content knowledge to learners in a practical manner. This involves outdoor activities that allow learners to identify the invasive plants and learn about the threats of

these invasive species. The best performing participants will be awarded bursaries. We are hoping that learners will be able to identify these species and react and thereby contribute towards the conservation of the resources. Excursions are also planned for these and are confident that we will come out more informed and alert.

Forestry Youth Advancement Programme (initially celebrated during September): This is one of our outgoing Forestry branch's attempt to create an enabling environment which supports continued life-long capacity development and promotes youth participation in socio-economic activities in the forest sector nationally and internationally. The Programme (a) promotes forestry education, training and skills development within the South African youth and offering them relevant and necessary support required and (b) promote forestry as a career of choice among the primary and secondary school learners. The best performing participants will be awarded certificates and funding support to implement the winning business proposals. This allows youth to conceptualise business cases and therefore an opportunities to realise those whilst contributing to the economic growth and development in this sector.

In closing, I want to cite the National Geographic in its October 1993 issue. "***All the water that ever will be is right now***".

Let us not just write and sing and draw about water – let us also care for and protect our water – so that issues of water, sanitation, health and hygiene do not remain the preserve of our politicians and technicians, but become the responsibility and right of every citizen of this country, and particularly the youth, who are the future of this country!

This brings me to the important point that the Awards are not just about winning prizes. We expect schools to practise what they preach through their songs, drama performances, poetry and posters. We cannot talk about the importance of cleaning sanitation facilities in our performances, win prizes and continue to neglect our sanitation facilities. We also expect schools that do not win to continue practising good health and hygiene behaviours.

Good luck and thank you!