

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

FOR WRITTEN REPLY

QUESTION NO 261

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(INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER NO 5)

261. Mr G R Morgan (DA) to ask the Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry:

- (1) Whether her department will take any measures in response to the recent report by the National Nuclear Regulator, entitled *Status Report on the Actions Arising from the Study of Radiological Contamination of the Wonderfonteinspruit Catchment Area*; if not, why not; if so, what measures;
- (2) whether there are any risks to humans and animals because of contamination in the Wonderfonteinspruit Catchment Area; if not, how did her department reach this conclusion; if so, what are the relevant details? NW576E

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REPLY:

- (1) The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, together with other relevant Departments including the National Nuclear Regulator (NNR) have established an inter-governmental committee called the Steering Committee for Remediation of Mining Related Radioactive Contamination (SCRMRRRC). This Committee has been established in order to co-ordinate all such future remediation at a national level. The Wonderfontein Spruit Catchment Area has been identified as a priority area for remediation and therefore the Wonderfontein Spruit Catchment Area Project Technical Working Group (WCAPTWG) was established through the SCRMRRRC in order to address specific clean-up actions.

The WCAPTWG has already met twice and has appointed a team of specialists who will identify and rank hot spot areas targeted for remedial action. This team of specialists will also provide the regulators with a remediation plan for the identified hotspots. The regulators intend to embark on the clean-up action in collaboration with the mining interest group in the area.

- (2) The studies undertaken by the various organisations over a period of time concluded that the radioactivity levels in the river water in the area is well within the water quality safety standards. However, there is a concern regarding elevated levels of Uranium and heavy metals in the sediment. The risk of exposure to humans and animals can be increased if the sediments are stirred up and are in suspension during swimming or when cattle are drinking from the river.

The most recent comprehensive study that was done by the Water Research Commission, WRC 1214 (2006) concludes that the present *status quo* will remain as long as the sediment remain "wet" and that, chemically, the water is fit for consumption, which conclusion is supported by the recent Brenk Report (2007) that was commissioned by the NNR.

Unfortunately the Report in question is based on only a few samples taken and the interpretations in the study are seen as premature at this stage. A public health study looking at blood and urine samples compared 36 individuals exposed to the "contaminated" Wonderfonteinspruit with 24 individuals exposed to the "clean" Mooi River in 2002 and, in essence, no difference was found in the profiles.

The Department has paid serious attention to the concerns raised and, as a result, has consulted widely. There are a number of different views on the subject and all are being evaluated.

The conclusion reached is that while there is reason for concern, the 40 year old problem has not produced any conclusive results, or any reason for immediate action. However, in order to conform to the Precautionary Principle, further investigations are in process.