

Media release

Date: 28 June 2010

Issued by: The Department of Water Affairs

WATER DEPARTMENT MOVES TO CURB POLLUTION OF WATER SOURCES

The Department of Water Affairs has noted with concern recent media reports of an environmental lobby group -the Environment and Conservation Association, which is said to be preparing to bring criminal charges against Water and Environmental Affairs Minister Buyelwa Sonjica for apparently not attending to the pollution contaminating the Hartbeespoort Dam.

The department views this as an unfortunate course of action in the light of the work that the department is doing to remedy the situation not only in the Hartbeespoort Dam but in tackling pollution generally in the entire country. "The issue of pollution in our water sources is a complex challenge that requires the collective effort of everyone in the sector" said Nobu Ngele, the Acting Director General in the department. She said historical challenges such as the state of water infrastructure, inadequate funding and the skills shortage compounded the problem but efforts to collaborate with local government in dealing with the problem are being undertaken vigorously.

While commending the efforts of the department's enforcement unit which continues to take legal steps against officials who neglect their duties and the Madibeng Local Municipality in particular for allowing sewage from its waste water treatment plant to pollute the Hartbeespoort dam, she warned that legal action alone against those who appear to have neglected their constitutional duties is not the ultimate answer to pollution problems. "We can't rely solely on the fact that someone has been served with legal papers to comply, we are more inclined to support co-operation in order that the situation receives the required attention timeously" she said.

Regarding the Hartbeespoort dam problem, Ngele said that "it must be borne in mind that the challenges that plague the dam are historic in nature and have been in the making for more than 80 years". In addition, as is the case with most dams in South Africa the Hartbeespoort Dam is also impacted on by un-controlled elements such as urbanization, agricultural activities and mining. These elements are largely responsible for the increase in storm-water, waste-water discharge, and so on.

In 2006, a programme known as the Harties Metsi Ame Remediation Plan was established by the Department of Water Affairs (DWA) to address the challenges of water pollution and to address the impact of illegal waste discharges into the Hartbeespoort dam. Led by the department in close co-operation with Northwest Department of Agriculture Conservation and Rural Development (NWDACERD), this programme is built on a solid scientific base and sound legislative framework which has ensured a steady and sustainable path for the programme to progress.

Ngele also outlined elements of an integrated approach to address gaps in water pollution control in the area:

- Enforce compliance with license conditions by mines around the area

- Enforce the blue/ green drop compliance standards to all municipalities
- Begin a remediation programme that will re-establish the ecological process of the Hartbeespoort Dam. This process involved the establishment of the food web by removing unwanted exotic sediment and establishing shoreline, wetland conditions in the dam and the introduction of biological and mechanical harvesting of algae and hyacinths

She confirmed that all these processes are working concurrently to manage the remediation of the dam in an integrated manner. “The programme is extensive and at most times requiring specialist from different sector departments and organizations” she said. The Department also acknowledges that support to local government on compliance practices is important to sustain the remediation programme.

In addition to the focused work that is underway, the Department has allocated R500,00.00 to the Madibeng Local Municipality for institutional capacity as it was identified by the municipality that there is a dire need to strengthen their planning with regard to water.

The department has made a further allocation of R27 million for a bulk water project which includes the expansion of the water purification works to meet the current demand. DWA has also deployed to the Madibeng LM a technical assistant and an engineer is expected to be deployed by the departmental Emergency Response Facility (ERF) to assist the municipality to implement their water services projects.

Ngele was satisfied that the Harties Metsi Ame programme has made much progress. “The first and short-term phase focuses on removing unwanted exotic sediment feeding Carp and Babel fish, establishing shoreline and wetland conditions in the dam and the introduction of biological and mechanical harvesting of algae and hyacinths” she said. Progress is being monitored by two ecological surveys that show that the fish composition in the dam has already improved since the implementation of this programme.

The second phase extends the focus to the broader catchment impacts and includes improved storm water management as well as the protection and remediation of wetlands and in-stream river habitats with more stringent standards of compliance and enforcement.

She concluded by calling on all stakeholders to work with each other in dealing with these challenges as opposed to grand standing and working against each other. “We have a collective responsibility as stakeholders in the water sector to collaborate and bring quality services to the people of South Africa” she said.

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