

Top Story: Dirty Water - DA calls for emergency team to be dispatched.



The Democratic Alliance has called for the immediate release of the report on a diarrhoea outbreak in the Ukhahlamba district of the Eastern Cape which has thus far resulted in the deaths of 123 infants, ostensibly caused by contaminated water.

A report on the matter had been drawn up but the government had delayed its release.

This is unacceptable, given the urgency of the situation," the party said.

In a joint statement, DA spokesperson on health, Mike Waters, and spokesperson on water affairs and forestry Mpowele Swathe said an emergency team should be sent into the province to restore water quality and oversee emergency health care.

Rather than making whistle-stop publicity trips, the Ministers of Health and of Water Affairs and Forestry should get directly involved and spend time in the province making sure that proper systems of water supply are available, that clinics are run efficiently, and that officials are doing their jobs effectively," they said.

They also called for the suspension of the officials responsible from both departments.

Waters said that the government's response to the outbreak appeared to have been focused entirely on preventing anyone from being held accountable for the problem rather than on solving it.

After the first deaths, when a mother of one of the dead babies begged for someone to be held accountable, she was told that it was 'too early' to blame officials."

Yet the problem with the broken down water treatment works had been highlighted six months previously and nothing had been done to address it."

As well as short term measures to prevent more deaths in this district, a sustainable solution to deteriorating water quality across South Africa needed to be formulated, Swathe said.

A month ago, after the DA raised concerns about failing water treatment works, the Minister denied that there was any problem; yet the Ukhahlamba crisis only adds to a long list of areas where people are affected by poisonous water."

Many of our water quality problems stem from the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry's (DWAF) failure to take a hard line with municipalities that are neglecting their sewage treatment works," he said.

The department was empowered to fine or prosecute municipalities that fail to maintain their water and sewerage systems adequately, but it seldom did so.

DWAF must now stand by an earlier promise it has made to take a harder line with municipalities in future, as well as drawing up a detailed picture of what needs to be done and where and, in particular, where the most urgent and life-threatening problems are," the spokesmen concluded.



South Africa's looming water crisis and the DA's plan to address it (we would not mention the party name in the website)

Statement issued by: Mpowele Swathe, DA spokesperson on Water Affairs & Forestry 06 March 2008

South Africa faces an electricity supply crisis today because the government ignored the warnings it was given more than ten years ago. The same situation is now facing us with regard to water supply. A combination of polluted water sources and poor management of dams, sewerage works and treatment plants has led to a situation where our water supply is under serious threat.

In 2000 South Africa faced one of its biggest health threats ever when a cholera epidemic swept through the country, leaving at least 265 people dead and infecting 117 147 people in five provinces. We can expect more such epidemics unless we address this problem urgently.

Water Affairs Minister Lindiwe Hendricks has announced that she will be presenting to Parliament next Tuesday about why South Africa is not facing a water crisis. In a document presented today the DA will outline the reasons that we do in fact face a looming crisis, and make some proposals for addressing it. We will be presenting this document to the Minister to ensure that the national spotlight is turned onto this matter before it is too late.

1. Water sources

The areas where our water originates are being damaged by a generalised official disregard for the environmental consequences of industrial activity. The departments of environment at provincial and national level find themselves in ongoing battles with the Department of Minerals and Energy over attempts to authorise mining in environmentally sensitive areas. Similar problems apply to agriculture. In terms of the Environmental Conservation Act, farmers are not supposed to cultivate land within 30-40m of rivers and wetlands. But this provision is frequently ignored by farmers who know, for example, that in the Western Cape the Department of Agriculture employs only two inspectors to cover the whole province.

The Wonderfonteinsspruit catchment area is a particularly clear example of how bureaucratic neglect and unfettered industrial activity are polluting our water at its source. Last year, the Brenk Report showed how sediments within the water at the Wonderfonteinsspruit had been contaminated by potentially dangerous chemicals as a result of several decades of acid mine drainage. Yet there is little sign of official concern.

A further problem relates to the poor management of informal settlements. With inadequate sewerage systems in place, and little provision for the removal of waste, large quantities of waste are washed into rivers, where they make their way to overburdened water purification plants.

2. Management of dams

The problems are exacerbated by shortcomings in the management of our dams, which reduces the supply of water we have available and also affects its quality. Build-up of silt, for

example, can cause further problems for local councils with regard to the purification of water. According to a reply given by Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry Lindiwe Hendricks in July last year, only 160 of the 294 dams owned and managed by her department – 54% - comply with modern safety standards.

As the quality of the water from our water sources deteriorates, it becomes more complex and more expensive to purify this water to make it safe for drinking. For example, the City of Cape Town is spending R400 000 a month more than it should on treating water from the Voelvlei dam alone because of the high level of pollutants in the water.

3. Poor maintenance of municipal water and sewerage systems

To compound this problem, the water treatment plants themselves, and the pipes that deliver clean water to our cities and towns, are old and dilapidated. Most municipal sewerage systems in South Africa are 30 to 50 years old. But few councils are doing anything more than band-aid maintenance. There are many examples of the consequences of this. I will mention only two:

- Pollution in the Vaal River as a result of ongoing sewerage spills has been a problem for over a decade. For many years local residents have been attempting to obtain a commitment from government to rebuild faulty systems. Legal action is now being threatened.
- In a survey carried out six days after the Duzi Canoe Marathon this year, over 40 percent of the field were found to have gone down with chronic diarrhoea. Tests showed that the levels of human faecal contamination in the Umsunduzi River were 115 000 per 100ml; according to international standards, an acceptable drinkable count is 150 per 100ml of water. The uMgungundlovu district, through which the Umsunduzi River runs, has the highest diarrhoea infection rate in the whole country. According to conservationist and Duzi race pioneer Dr Ian Player, the river gets more dangerous as every year goes by because there's inadequate attention to what is happening all down the river.

This dire situation has been obvious for several years and has been made known to the DWAF through various reports that have been presented to it. Despite all of this evidence, however, the problem remains.

A further complication is that councils have been under enormous pressure to expand water and sewerage infrastructure to service previously under-serviced areas. This has added to the burden on existing infrastructure. In 2003 the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry warned about the consequences of rolling out new water projects without setting aside enough money to maintain the existing facilities. But the political pressure to deliver has often caused this problem to be ignored. The national government has also not prioritised it adequately. While it estimates that R180bn would be needed for a complete overhaul of the system, it allocated only R1bn – less than one percent of what is needed – this year.

Solutions

It is imperative that we urgently find ways to resolve this problem before it is too late. The DA has various proposals for both rural and urban areas.

In urban areas:

- The DWAF needs to adopt a zero tolerance approach towards non-compliant councils. It is empowered to fine or prosecute municipalities that fail to maintain their water and sewerage systems adequately. It has hardly ever done so.

- A national task team needs to be established within the DWAF to work with the 100 municipalities where water quality management is at its worst. This team must help to identify what problems they face and help to resolve them.
- The main problem with South Africa's water infrastructure is not a shortage of money, but poor operation. DWAF, in conjunction with municipalities, must therefore develop clear career progression paths for staff and a range of in-house training modules to give staff the opportunity to upgrade their skills.
- Municipalities need to learn from those which have overcome their problems. A survey of success stories needs to be conducted and compiled into a best practices guide to assist municipalities that are still struggling.
- The victims of poor water quality are ordinary people. We propose a national hotline to which people can report complaints to give them the means to highlight problems before they turn into a national crisis.
- Local Water Services Development Plans do not take sufficient account of existing water resource management principles. We need to amend legislation to require local councils to take ecological constraints into account before initiating or extending water delivery services.
- Co-operative governance is proving to be an ineffective tool in protecting the environment against the negative impacts of human activity, and legislation and policies at different levels sometimes contradict each other. Clearer legislative boundaries need to be set; and, ideally, much more involvement from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism is required in adjudicating over environmental decisions.
- Finally, as a result of the country's apartheid past, there is little culture in South Africa of participation in government processes relating to the environment. While the government cannot compel people to be more involved in decisions that will affect them, it can certainly make it easier for opinions to be heard and it can create more effective avenues through which the public can express their opinions.

In rural areas, we propose the following:

Firstly, in order to make all the parties whose actions affect water quality involved in preserving it, a process needs to be initiated to involve all farmers, developers, industries and local councils in the holistic management of water.

The premier international example is the Catskill-Delaware Water Management System, which delivers 4.5 billion litres of water from the Catskill-Delaware watershed system to nine million people in New York every day. The water is of such pristine quality that it does not require filtration, but the water is delivered at one eighth of the cost of a filtration system.

The government needs to consider adapting the principles applied in this project to our own circumstances. With regard to farmers, for example, the objective would be to develop Whole Farm Plans, with farmers and environment officials identifying any potential pollutants and reviewing the options available to tackle them. Similar plans would be developed with other parties with the ultimate objective being the elimination or substantial reduction of water pollution.

Secondly, many of the reserves where our water originates are fragmented and are poorly managed from a water retention point of view. For example, at least 200 000 ha of mountainous land in the Western Cape is set out for protection under the Mountain Catchment Areas Act. But since the declaration of this Act in 1972 not a single regulation has been proclaimed to manage these areas.

A process needs to be started to review all the legislation pertaining to the management of our water resources and ensure that all aspects of the law are compatible, and to proclaim and properly manage these areas.

Finally, areas which are important reserves for water and which have been dangerously contaminated - the Wonderfonteinsspruit is a key example of this - need to be tackled through specific action plans rather than high-level denial. The DWAF needs to ensure that it keeps on top of problem areas, and ensures that local councils or provinces respond appropriately and have the resources they need to implement their action plans.



Recent water incidents

Over the past three months 80 children have died of diarrhoea after drinking dirty tap water in the Ukhahlamba district municipality, which includes the towns of Barkly East, Maclear, Sterkspruit and Elliot in Eastern Cape. There was a breakdown at a municipal water purification works last October.

Nearly 2000 people were treated in Delmas and Standerton, Mpumalanga, between October and February following an outbreak of diarrhoea. The province's ailing sewage system was blamed.

Although no proper audit has been done, several municipalities face a chronic shortage of technical skills required for the delivery of clean and safe water.

A few days after the Dusi Canoe Marathon in January, about 40% of participating canoeists came down with diarrhoea. The Msunduzi River in KwaZulu-Natal, on which the race is held, had E.coli bacteria levels of 115000 per 100ml nine days before the race. Acceptable levels are between 100 and 1000.

In February, the water affairs and forestry department said more than half of SA's public dams including the biggest, the Gariep Dam in Free State did not comply fully with modern-day safety standards. It said that in October last year, 160 of the country's 294 dams did not comply with safety standards.

In March, four of Durban's beaches were stripped of their Blue Flag status by the international rating body due to high levels of faecal pollution.

A report by national aquatic biologist Dr Mark Graham said almost 30% of Durban's watercourses were polluted.

The Democratic Alliance said a study it conducted recently found that many water boards delivered water that contravened safety standards and contained dangerously high levels of bacteria. Amatola in Eastern Cape and Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga were incapacitated by high levels of unpaid debt from municipalities, preventing them from making much-needed investments in infrastructure development.

Forty-three out of 83 municipalities in Free State received code red" ratings last month in the water affairs and forestry department's monthly drinking water quality summary report, indicating that the quality of the water was seriously compromised.

Free State University's Jan Roos reported high levels of E.coli bacteria in the Vaal River last year.

DA@WORK, 12 May 2008