

WeedBuster Week 2008
Launch of Outdoor Learning Educational Material
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Cape Nature Witfontein Nature Reserve, George
7 October 2008

Councillors,
Municipal Managers
Distinguished Guests,
Programme Director,
Ladies and Gentlemen and learners

Molweni, Good Morning, Goeie Môre

It is an honour for me to be here to join the community of George to celebrate Weedbuster Week and to also launch the outdoor learning resource manual.

It is so refreshing to be here in this green countryside, look at the beauty and breathe all this clean oxygen and pollution free air. This region and the Garden Route, is recognised internationally as one of the most beautiful regions and attracts visitors from all over South Africa and the world. These visitors are able to appreciate this environment and in turn they create opportunities for business and employment. It is important for us to reflect on the benefits that nature and the environment give to us, and in turn how we need to protect our environment so that it continues to give us these benefits.

Such benefits may be in the form of tourism, but they are also in the form of well functioning eco-systems that provide clean air or clean water.

To protect our environment and get such benefits requires investment. During Weedbuster week we celebrate the success of our investment in removing alien invasive plant species. As you know these invasives consume more water than indigenous plant species, and we estimate that the return on our investment of removing these species is a release of between forty eight million and fifty six million cubic metres of additional water for alternative uses annually.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is a lot of water that we are saving and giving back to the environment! But there is still so much more than needs to be done because of the large amount of alien plant species in our country, covering as much as 10 million hectares. We estimate that 7% of our annual water runoff is being sucked up by invasive alien plants, which is the same as two Vaal dams.

Programme Director, as we have heard this year the theme of Weedbuster Week is **Plant Me Instead**, we have chosen this theme because as we remove these alien species we recognise that we need to replace them by planting indigenous species, which use less water and provide us with many other benefits.

There is a lot more work that needs to be done and more investment required to remove these alien species and plant indigenous species in their place. We need the next generation, the youth of today, to understand the challenges and threats to our environment so that they are able to help us find solutions to protecting our natural environment. It for that reason that I am pleased to be launching this outdoor learning resource manual, as it will create awareness of the importance of the environment and contribute to fostering a culture of conservation in our country. It also provides an integrated outdoor curriculum for use by primary and secondary schools

I see this manual and the work done by this centre as an investment of a different kind; an investment in the youth so that they can learn about these threats to the environment, and to look for solutions. A wise man once told me that the problems of today will not be addressed using today's knowledge; they will be solved with new ideas that will come from the youth. It is important therefore that we invest in our youth and support them to acquire skills and knowledge.

This facility is making an important contribution to these efforts of educating our youth. I am informed that the facility caters for Medicinal, Water, Wetland, Commercial Forest, Fynbos and now Invasive resource materials.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry in partnership with Cape Nature Conservation Board identified the Witfontein Nature Reserve in George as an ideal location to initiate an Environmental Education Initiative.

This has seen the fruition of partnerships with diverse community based organisations in the area, namely SANPARKS, Working on Fire, Department of Education, Traditional Healers, and the Rastafarian Community. The Witfontein Nature Reserve was proclaimed in 1988 as a mountain catchment area; a source for drinking water and conservation of biodiversity.

These partnerships are important because they attract more people to utilising our parks and reserves. There are many people in our country who feel that these facilities are not for them; it through creating awareness of their existence as well as by providing environmental education that we will attract these 'non user' communities to enjoy the benefits of our parks and natural environment.

Enjoying our natural environment requires that we create more awareness about threats to the environment caused by alien invasive species and what can be done to protect the environment by the removal of these invasives. One of the most important initiatives that we have to remove alien invasive specie is the Working for Water programme, which was established by government 13 years ago.

At the launch of Weedbuster week yesterday in Jacobsdal in the Free State I explained to the community how far we have come in the Working for Water programme, and the achievements we have made in terms of the number of hectors of invasives that have been cleared since the start of the programme as well the number of jobs that have been created. The programme was started in 1995 through a grant of R25 million from the then Reconstruction and Development programme. The programme now has an annual budget of R387 million; and during the last financial year the programme created 30 210 jobs, cleared 140,000 hectares of new areas and provided almost 550,000 hectares of follow-up treatment on areas previously cleared; in addition to the water savings that I have already mentioned.

I also explained to the Jacobsdal community the threats caused by invasive species, which include:

- The high consumption of water;
- the degradation of our rich biological diversity which underpins our tourism industry;
- the damage done to the ecological integrity of our natural systems on which we all depend for our livelihoods;
- the problems caused by invasive species which take over land that could be used productively for agriculture; and
- the problem of fire management caused by alien-invasive fuelled wildfires.

We are aware that the Southern Cape is a fire prone area and the high infestation of species such as pines, black wattle, eucalyptus and pampas grass make wild fires a constant threat. And we have established a partnership to clear invasive alien plants between the Working for Water Programme and CapeNature. This partnership has helped to improve not only the resource management in the area but has improved the socio-economic benefit of the Mossel Bay-George's lives.

For example Working for Water has resulted in approximately 1000 job opportunities for contractors and workers from George and Mossel Bay over the years. Currently in George we have employed 144 people and in the Eden District Municipality 738 have been employed.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the clearing done by these workers has many positive impacts by providing the people in the programme with skills not only in clearing invasives but also to obtain work outside of the programme or to start businesses. One example is Samuel Bewee, a contractor with a disability, has started a company called Vuka Alien Plants Workers and through the programme's empowerment managed to buy himself a bakkie, secure R20,000.00 worth of equipment and is managing eleven workers.

Fatima a female WfW Programme contractor in George has risen up the ranks. Before joining the WfW Programme she was a domestic worker. On top of being a successful contractor in the programme, she was during the women's month this year elected as a representative in the Women in Water and Forestry Organisation for DWAF Western Cape- George.

The work done by Working for Water employees is not easy and we must acknowledge the risks that they take, particularly those working at high altitudes. Sadly we have had some workers die on duty, and I would like to pay tribute to a Working for Water worker, the late Ms Gerty Hannes, a high altitude team member of the Witfontein Nature Reserve project, who passed away in May 2008 while she was at work. Our thoughts are with her family.

To conclude ladies and gentlemen, aliens are a real threat to our environment; I would like to call on you, the community to be more aware of and take responsibility for removing invasives and planting indigenous

species. I also want to appeal to teachers and learners to use the outdoor educational material to support development for our youth.

I thank all the workers involved in this project, all the committed partners, and the youth who will be developing solutions to the challenges that confront us.

I thank you.