**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE CALLS FOR THE SPEEDILY FINALISATION OF INVESTIGATIONS INTO THE ISIMANGALISO SHOOTING AND UPL FIRE**

**Parliament, Friday, 11 February 2022 –** The Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries this week received briefings from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment; the Provincial Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs; Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and the iSimangaliso Wetland Park on the 12 November 2021 shooting incident between rangers and poachers at Tewate in iSimangaliso Wetland Park. One person was shot and, to date, the body has not been found. The committee also heard that evidence, in the form of the boat that was used by the poachers, was destroyed while the police were in attendance.

The Chairperson of the committee, Ms Faith Muthambi, asked Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife how it was possible that a family involved in a previous incident, the Mdluli family, could be involved again in this one. The family has requested an independent inquiry into the latest incident, Ms Muthambi said.

The committee also wanted to know how Ezemvelo Wildlife was helping local communities, as unemployment, poverty and inequality are very high in these areas and people risk their lives to feed their families. The department promised to send the committees the register of small-scale fishers in the area. The committee also heard that there have been 72 poaching incidents in the area and 25 of these involved the use of firearms. The committee asked the department to submit a report on these cases.

On the investigation into the UPL fire incident in July 2021, the committee was briefed by the departments of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries; Health; the South African Police Services (SAPS); eThekwini Metropolitan Municipality, the Interim Multi Stakeholder Forum and non-governmental and community-based organisations such as Groundwork, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), representatives of Blackburn Village, Phoenix and Cornubia and the Sugarcane Farmers Association.

The committee heard allegations from SDCEA's Mr Desmond D'Sa that local communities have not been made aware of any information relating to the impact of the fire on the environment and surrounding communities, nor have they been able to ask any questions of UPL. Furthermore, community members who were tested at the UPL clinic were not informed which tests were being done and they were also unsure of the future impact on their health. Mr D'Sa also informed the committee that the staff who work at the UPL clinic have been asked to sign a secrecy document.

Mr Jeremy Ridl of the Interim Multi Stakeholder Forum told the committee that no meaningful public engagement has occurred with affected communities.

Mr Zameer Khan of Phoenix informed the committee that fishermen's livelihoods have been affected by the chemical spillage, which reached the Umhlanga estuary. Neither the government nor UPL has provided any assistance with regard to compensation for their loss of income.

The SAPS reported that a case was opened against UPL at the Verulam SAPS office on charges relating to the Environmental Act. The investigation is ongoing as a number of specialists' reports are still outstanding. No arrests have been made as yet.

The committee was updated by the department that the "polluter pays" principle is in effect. Thus far over 18 million kilograms of solid waste, over 58 million litres of liquid and 3 900 kilograms of dead fish have been removed from the area.

The committee thereafter received presentations from St Lucia business, tourism and community stakeholders on the environmental, social and economic impact of the closing of the St Lucia estuary. The committee heard from farmers that they require assistance to continue farming, as they are unable to grow crops because of the flooding. Small-scale fishers also informed the committee that due to the closure of the river mouth, their livelihoods are threatened as there are not enough fish. Mr Robbie Hanson, a marine scientist told the committee that marine species such as the flathead mullet, which was once in abundance, have become extinct.

Tourism business owners and the ratepayers' association told the committee that due to the estuary being closed fishing and other events are no longer being held, which used to attract a large number of visitors to the area. Tourism numbers have fallen and the community needs the estuary opened again so that the area will flourish once again.

The chairperson informed the meeting that, as part of its oversight, the committee will visit UPL in Durban and St Lucia to hold follow up engagements with affected stakeholders.

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, FORESTRY AND FISHERIES, MS FAITH MUTHAMBI.**

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