Debate on Vote No 32 - Forestry, Fisheries and Environment

Minister, its going to take more than a petty name change from Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (EFF) to Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (FFE) for this department to end the rot that has taken root in the department and entities under its management.

This government has tremendous problems. Right now juggling the names of departments isn’t a priority. When this report was tabled at the last Portfolio Committee meeting, it was almost not adopted due to insufficient support. You were saved by a member of the IFP. I can tell you with certainty, that your party’s factional battles are now playing itself out in parliament.

Minister, it is under your watch that in a single year, irregular expenditure jumped from R342-million to R2.9-billion in the department due to inadequate monitoring of compliance with supply chain management laws and regulations.

Minister, according to the last Auditor General’s report, among the many supply change management irregularities included procurement without inviting competitive bids.

These issues appeared to be a common phenomenon in the environmental portfolio. Tenders amounting to almost R380 million were awarded to preferential bidders. Put another way Minister, the tenders were created especially for these bidders.

Disciplinary action was taken against employees of this department for a total of more than R152 million.

In addition, fraud and misconduct in more than R1.4 Billion worth of allocations.

Then there’s wasteful expenditure of more than R141 million due to poor management.

That brings us to a total of just over R2 Billion for environment alone.

Minister according to the last Auditor General’s report at least 87% of the irregular expenditure relates to the department itself, where internal controls were inadequately designed and implemented.

Minister, the finances of this department is run like a toddler’s piggybank because sadly, fruitless expenditure relates to pre-payments made to implementing agents, vendors and suppliers, for goods and services that were not in line with the contractual arrangements and agreed deliverables, cancellation of travel or no-show accommodation, payment of interest and penalties, payment of VAT charged by non-VAT vendors, damaged stock, misuse of vehicles and overpayment to suppliers.

Part of the mandate of this department is to ensure the protection of the environment for future generations to enjoy. Residents of Wentworth that were affected by the explosion at the Engen refinery in December last year are still aggrieved by the lack of urgency in addressing the aftermath of the explosion. Minister why was a refinery allowed to continue operating when it is so close to a densely populated urban area?

Minister it seems that the only time it’s a crime to contravene environmental laws is when the offenders are poor indigenous black people as in the case of the members of the Hobeni community who were found guilty of fishing in the Marine Protected Area , adjacent to the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve.

Thankfully, the Appeal Court eventually upheld their appeal against the sentence and conviction. So minister, my question to you is, will indigenous black people have to still go to such lengths in order to exercise their customary right to ply their trade which has passed down for many generations?

Small scale fishers have not been spared from the ineptness of this department. The Minister had to approach the high court to scrap the flawed process followed in awarding small-scale fishing rights in the Western Cape.

The universe the department is living in is not the same as the one that small-scale fishers are living in.

It is two completely different worlds from the equality and human rights issues rooted in the implementation of the small-scale Fisheries Policy.

There is also a third universe, the private sector fishing companies that continue to fight to keep their privilege.

The fourth universe is the environmentalist protecting the environment to the point that people are pushed away. Small-scale fishers are in need of environmental justice.

Chairperson that brings me to the forestry management component of this department.

Forestry products contribute at least 4.5% to total manufacturing placing it among the top five sectors in manufacturing.

In less than 10 years, export earnings have almost trebled, with the sector providing a positive trade balance of close to R10 billion.

Much of forestry operations are rurally based, making it a significant contributor to rural economies supporting close 700 000 livelihoods.

Contrary to the traditional view of forestry as the science of managing forested land, forestry today is about the relationships between people and the resources provided by the forest and it is in area where issues remain unresolved. These issues have not been addressed since they were raised at public hearings in 2017. We can only attribute the reason for this once again to the continuous infighting in the ANC. Chairperson the infighting will never end and therefore we will never have ANC ministers who will be focused on taking of the needs of South Africans.

The EFF does not support this report.