

16 May 2018

Budget Vote Speech by the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs, Ms Barbara Thomson, National Assembly

Honourable Chairperson of the Session;
Honourable Minister of Environmental Affairs, Dr Edna Molewa;
Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers;
MEC's responsible for Environmental Affairs
Honourable Chairperson and Members of the Portfolio Committee on Environmental Affairs;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Distinguished Chairpersons and Chief Executives of Public Entities;
Government officials present,
Representatives of the private sector;
Our guests;
Ladies and gentlemen.

Today is the first time the international community is marking the International Day of Living Together in Peace. It is a Day in which all nations, and people of the world, should strive to find ways and means of respecting one another, living in harmony and without conflict.

In four days, we will also mark Africa Day – a Day which provides us with the opportunity to reconnect and recommit ourselves to building a better Africa, and a better world, for all our people.

In working to achieve peace globally, and to improving the lives of our people, conservation of the environment should play an important role. Without the sustainable use of our rich and abundant natural resources, we will decimate our environment – an act that will be to the detriment of humankind.

To address the negative impacts of climate change, particularly the increase extreme weather conditions in our country, we have introduced a number of measures to ensure that all our people – children, women, the elderly and poor communities – are able to deal with the impacts of drought, flooding and other extreme weather events on crops and food supplies, infrastructure and livelihoods.

Honourable Members,

During the SONA in February, our President Ramaphosa highlighted a number of actions and commitments to create jobs and address the plight of our youth. The Department has, and will, continue to create work opportunities through the number of environmental programmes being rolled-out. Amongst the highlights achieved in the past financial year include:

- The creation of 71 948 Work Opportunities and 28 243 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) created with more than 60% of these participants being young people and women
- 140 wetlands have been rehabilitated as part of the Working for Water effort to achieve the goal of land degradation neutrality in South Africa.
- Placing 56 660 hectares of land under rehabilitation and/or restoration
- Providing initial treatment to 171 198 hectares of land invaded by invasive alien plants and undertaking follow-up treatment on 601 944 hectares of land

The department works with all provinces, municipalities, Community Based Organizations, Traditional Authorities and public entities to implement environmental programmes.

In 2017 the Working on Fire Programme was confronted with the devastating fires along the Garden Route, most notably in Knysna. The runaway fires that began on 7 June (2017) and burned along a 300 km fire line for nearly two weeks, destroyed 21 500 ha of land which stretched from Great Brak to outside Port Elizabeth. Members of the Working on Fire team spent the two weeks fighting the raging fires. Tragically six lives were lost, infrastructure damage ran into billions of rands and over 2 500 jobs were affected, impacting on the economy of the towns along the route. Greater advocacy and awareness programmes must continue in an effort to minimise the risk of future fires in areas where highly flammable alien invasive vegetation is present.

Working for the Coast Infrastructure

Further development of coastal infrastructure will be undertaken in this financial year. This includes improved community access to the coast. Slipways/ Boat Launching Sites will be constructed to support the newly permitted areas for boat based whale watching and shark cage diving.

New policies on boat based whale watching and shark cage diving were developed to enable participation from previously disadvantaged people and change the status quo. It seems that previous rights holders believe they have permanent right to benefit from boat based whale watching and shark cage diving activities whilst excluding the black and poor.

Community beneficiation

This year, the Department in collaboration with protected Areas Management Authorities and their associated provinces will be hosting the 8th national People and Parks conference. This initiative continues to stand out as a government flagship programme aimed at transforming protected areas for the benefit of local communities through unlocking the economic potential thereof. To this date, a number of co-management agreements have been concluded.

The People and Parks projects also contribute towards the expansion of the conservation estate with associated infrastructure including community parks, lodges and ancillary amenities to make these viable economic enterprises. Communities will be capacitated to engage actively in the co-management of protected areas. Lastly, land restitution processes in and around protected areas present opportunities for conservation and empowerment.

Honourable Members,

The environmental sector is ideally placed to increase the ownership percentage of black women, youth and communities in our economy through the identification of economic opportunities associated with the sustainable use of our diverse range of natural resources or biodiversity.

We recognise Biodiversity as a basis for transformation and sustainable development. The Department has commenced with plans to transform two sub-sectors of the biodiversity economy, that is, the wildlife and bio-prospecting sectors within the ambit of the National Biodiversity Economy Strategy (NBES) and implementation plan.

We are working together with other stakeholders within the sector to identify ten million hectares of suitable land for participation of previously disadvantaged individuals and communities as owners of sustainable wildlife-based business ventures.

Honourable Members,

As I have mentioned, our youth and our children are the future of our beautiful country. A number of environmental programmes are being undertaken by the Department and its entities, including the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), to educate our youth about the environment, and to train young people to enter this vital field for example our Groen Sabenza participants.

The Department's Youth Employment Programme is aimed at exposing young South Africans to the culture of working as a springboard for future employment.

We value the Youth support Programme that we are implementing in partnership with municipalities wherein young people are placed at local government to fulfil environmental functions like waste management, air quality monitoring, greening of schools and maintenance of recreational parks. Youth employed in this programme will be trained and mentored to enable them to contribute to the much needed provision of basic services.

We have initiated in this FY a Mass Training Programme for youth to improve their skills with accredited environmental training courses and support programmes targeting 15 000 candidates.

SANBI has, through its “Kids in Gardens” Programme reached well over 50 000 beneficiaries in the past year. While many of the participating schools and organisations are regular clients to the programme, deliberate plans were made to market the programme to new schools resulting in 173 schools with almost 15 000 learners visiting the National Botanical Gardens in Pretoria for lessons for the first time. Further steps were taken targeting designated groups including learners with physical and mental disabilities.

The National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria, transferred to SANBI on 1 April from the National Research Foundation, not only enables SANBI to fulfil the function of protecting and preserving collections of animals in appropriate enclosures as outlined in the National Environment Management Biodiversity Act (NEMBA), but increases the institution’s research, conservation and educational platforms, and human capacity.

The National Zoological Garden provides an opportunity to increase the network of research institutions. It renders a number of services for other national departments, provincial agencies and the wildlife industry aimed at management of wild populations. The National Zoo expects to engage with learners on a variety of biodiversity topics, with educational offerings that focus on animals and the environment.

In addition to this, the National Zoo, through its existing capacity, will be interfacing with 420 000 members of public, thereby impacting significantly on awareness and understanding of environmental concerns.

Honourable Members,

Let me now turn to the matter of land remediation, and land rehabilitation.

National Action Plan and Land Degradation Neutrality

We are committed to meeting our goals for Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) as agreed by parties to the United Nations to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Through the LDN targets, South Africa aims to achieve a balance between anticipated land degradation (losses) and planned positive actions (gains), in order to achieve, at least, a position of no net loss of healthy and productive land while Neutrality is the minimum objective.

It will require an integrated landscape approach which will contribute to food security, water security and maintenance of carbon sinks.

We will therefore work with our scientific institutions and partners to clarify the links between land degradation and migration versus land degradation and instability/security.

Equally important is our preparedness to confirm the goal on land degradation neutrality in relation to other SDG’s on water, food and poverty.

Drought is another major phenomenon that affects South Africa as seen recently in the Western Cape, Northern Cape and KwaZulu- Natal provinces. The department is part of the Inter-Ministerial

Task Team on drought chaired by Cogta, to ensure that the environmental sector is part of the response measures to this important challenge.

Chairperson, we are going to ensure that our people live in an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being by rehabilitating asbestos contaminated roads in priority areas of Limpopo and Northern Cape.

I am delighted to announce that Part 8 of the Waste Act that deals with Remediation of contaminated land is in full force and various contaminated sites are planned to be remediated. This is a great step in ensuring that we re-use the brownfields for economic development and thereby saving green fields for agricultural production amongst other competing important uses.

The Transfrontier Conservation Areas continues to lead the way in showcasing how communities living alongside protected areas are able to derive livelihoods from their ecotourism enterprises. The Witsieshoek and Awelani Community lodges in the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Park and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area respectively are growing from strength to strength, providing meaningful employment opportunities and other revenue streams to the beneficiary communities.

A significant development in the Department's work in Transfrontier Conservation Areas was achieved with the SADC Secretariat and the German Government agreeing to establish a dedicated regional Financing Facility for SADC TFCAs (commonly referred to as TFCA Facility). The proposed TFCA Facility will be a flexible financial mechanism intended to provide financial support for the implementation of conservation and development actions in SADC TFCAs as stipulated in the existing management and development plans for individual TFCAs.

In 2018, South Africa will participate in a number of important international fora including the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and the 14th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the 9th Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the 3rd Meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing.

Importantly, we will from 4th to 8th December 2018 host the 7th Meeting of Parties to Agreement on African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA MOP7) developed under the framework of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS).

AEWA brings together countries and the wider international conservation community in an effort to establish coordinated conservation and management of migratory waterbirds throughout their entire migratory range. An example of these are flamingos and blue crane who are Intra-Africa migrants as well as some species of penguin, falcon and swallows that migrate to other continents. Hosting AEWA MOP7 will boost the bird watching tourism or avitourism, which according to a DTI study is found to generally offer higher than average trip spend and longer trip lengths in multiple provinces.

Conclusion

The government, the department is calling on civil society and business to come on board to protect our people against a changing environment with its devastating effects as experienced during extreme weather events like droughts, floods and desertification. We need to continue to work with, and educate, our communities, so that all are able to adapt to the changes that we are already experiencing and those that lie ahead.

Our focus on the youth will be scaled up to through education and skills development. These are the members of our society that will guide the way we live in future. We are working with municipalities, provinces, public entities, science councils and stakeholders in the environmental sector to make this possible.

I would like to thank the Honourable Minister, Dr Edna Molewa for her leadership in this difficult portfolio as well as the Director-General, Mrs Nosipho Ngcaba and the entire team at the Department for the support and the commitment to make our sector deliver in conformity with our constitutional obligations.

I thank you.