

## **Damning report reveals Department of Water and Sanitation in crisis, and SA's water security under serious threat**

The South African Water Caucus (SAWC) today launched a report which exposes the dysfunction and institutional paralysis in the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS). The report is almost entirely based on publicly accessible information including Parliamentary Questions and Answers, Portfolio Committee meeting reports, information from access to information (PAIA) requests and media articles. However, importantly, it presents it in a single document which paints a particularly bleak picture for SA's water institutions and hence water security.

The report reveals deeply concerning institutional and governance challenges in the DWS. It lays bare a situation of institutional paralysis within the department and associated deterioration in financial management, service delivery, policy coherence and performance. In brief, the central challenges facing the department, outlined in the report, relate to the following:

- Considerable human resource and organisational challenges including the suspension of senior managers, high staff turnover and vacancy rates and intensified capacity constraints;
- Serious financial mismanagement related to over-expenditure, accruals and failure to pay contractors and corresponding escalation of debt, overdraft of the Water Trading Entity and debt owed to the Reserve Bank, irregular, fruitless and wasteful expenditure, poor revenue collection and corruption allegations;
- Considerable policy and legislative uncertainty related to *inter alia* the proposed Water Master Plan, proposed Water and Sanitation Bill and the proposed National Water Resources and Services and Sanitation Strategy;
- Highly worrying steps to undermine or destroy established water institutions, including plans to consolidate nine catchment management agencies into a single national agency and plans to discontinue key statutory bodies like the Water Tribunal and Water Boards;
- Failure to publish Blue Drop (water quality) and Green Drop (waste water treatment) reports since 2013. The Blue Drop-Green Drop reports are arguably the only comprehensive assessments available to the public and water service authorities on whether water and wastewater treatment plants are functioning and complying with water quality standards. The absence of such assessments has considerable implications for management, operation, risk mitigation, remedial action and refurbishment plans related to treatment plants - and hence water safety and water quality;
- Deterioration in wastewater treatment works and infrastructure due to lack of maintenance and investment, with initial findings of the 2014 Green Drop report indicating that 212 waste water treatment plants fall within a "Critical Risk" categorisation. These plants pose serious risks of completely untreated sewage entering rivers, streams and dams. This has dire impacts on water quality and human health including enhancing the spread of diseases such as e-coli, hepatitis A and diarrhoea;

- Significant deficiencies in compliance monitoring and enforcement. Notably, DWS only has 35 compliance and enforcement officials for the whole country, and has never published a specific water compliance and enforcement report. The 2016/17 National Environmental Compliance and Enforcement report highlights that DWS has completely failed to undertake meaningful enforcement action against offenders. In 2017/2017, of 321 facilities inspected, 76 of which were found to require enforcement action, DWS has had zero (0) convictions for criminal offences. Despite widespread non-compliance, DWS has only suspended one water use licence since 1 January 2008.

The SAWC intends presenting the report to the Portfolio Committee on Water & Sanitation this week. The report can be downloaded [here](#).

The South African Water Caucus (SAWC) is network of more than 20 community-based organisations, non-government organisations and trade-unions active in promoting the wise, equitable and just use, protection and provision of water. It was formed in the lead up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. At its most recent Biennial General Meeting (BGM), SAWC urgently convened a task team to respond to the state of the water sector in general and the institutional and governance challenges in DWS in particular. In response, the task team seeks to build a broader coalition of support to respond to these challenges, engage with decision-makers and portfolio committee members, raise awareness of the state of the water sector and water institutions and, if necessary, institute legal action.

As a first step, SAWC recently addressed a [letter](#) to the Minister to strongly object to the decision to consolidate the established and planned CMAs into a single national agency. The letter highlighted that this decision “would fly in face of existing national water policy that provide for the decentralisation of and public participation in water governance” and hence called for the Minister to “keep the nine CMAs intact”. SAWC has received no response to this call.

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