

## Sewage Undoes Efforts Of WCape Dam Builders

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

Wednesday, 25 February 2009 10:01 -

---



The builders of the Berg River dam in the Western Cape incorporated features in its design to protect the environment, but did not reckon on their efforts being undone by downstream sewage plants spewing toxic effluent into the river they aimed to preserve.

Completed at the end of 2007, the R1.5 billion dam was the first in South Africa with built-in structures that permit both low and high flow environmental releases of water.

It is located just below the headwaters of the Berg River, which rises in the Drakenstein Mountains and meanders westwards past fields and farms to the Atlantic.

The river's pastoral appearance is deceptive, however; from a few kilometres below the Berg River dam's 70-metre high wall, it is badly polluted.

Dangerously high levels of poisonous E-coli bacteria have been recorded along the river's 300km course, caused -- the department of water affairs admits -- by "non-functional" sewage plants.

"The high E-coli counts are a result of the failure of the waste water treatment plants at the [downstream] municipalities; these plants are non-functional," deputy director general national water resources and infrastructure, Cornelius Ruiters, told Sapa on Tuesday.

Speaking at the Implementing Environmental Water Allocations (IEWA) conference underway in Port Elizabeth, he said there were a "number" of municipalities responsible for the problem, but named only one town.

"There are a number of them, from Franschhoek right down to the river mouth," he said.

Other towns in the intensively-cultivated Berg River valley include Paarl, Wellington, Piketberg and Darling.

Ruiters said the Water Research Commission (WRC) had studied the problem.

"They found most of the waste water treatment works on the Berg River are non-functional, or there is spillage," he said.

The faecal contamination of the Berg River has caused concern among farmers who use its water to irrigate their crops, many of which are exported.

Ruiters conceded the situation could have "a highly detrimental impact" on the valley's agriculture, and "major consequences" for farmers' export crops.

Asked what was being done to correct the situation, he said his department still needed to set priorities and see where it should focus.

## Sewage Undoes Efforts Of WCape Dam Builders

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

Wednesday, 25 February 2009 10:01 -

---

"The time for talk is over," he declared, saying the department's enforcement officials, the so-called Blue Scorpions, would visit the culprit municipalities and "give them the necessary directives".

On when this would happen, he replied: "We will try to sort most of the problems out in the next financial year."

Approached for further comment on the issue, WRC director for water-linked ecosystems, Steve Mitchell, said the technology to treat effluent in the region existed, but "very often the people running the works are not adequately trained, and quite often the works are old and need to be upgraded".

While Treasury had made funds available for such upgrading, often the local authorities were not able to apply for them and implement the necessary upgrade.

"So our problems come down to not actually using the technologies we've got."

Asked why he thought the problem had gone on for some years, with a seeming lack of action from the responsible authorities, he suggested this was connected to the fact those managing the resources belonged to the same organisation as those tasked to police it.

"What we've got is a situation where we have one arm of the department policing another arm. That is a situation where the government can't actually prosecute itself," he said.

At the IEWA conference on Tuesday, the multi-million rand enviro-friendly features included in the Berg River dam's design were held up -- in at least one presentation -- as an example of how to properly protect downstream aquatic ecosystems.

Source : Sapa /rod/jk

Date : 24 Feb 2009 16:03