

Consulting South Africa's diverse population about the country's proposed National Water Resource Strategy

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Abstract

The aim of the National Water Resource Strategy developed by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry as the public trustee of the country's water resources, is to ensure that there is enough water of the right quality for the people of South Africa. This is to be achieved through proper use and management of water resources. The Strategy describes the ways in which South Africa's water resources will be protected, used, developed, conserved, managed and controlled. Since this may affect the way in which the various sectors of society use and value water, it is imperative that stakeholders have access to sufficient information and are provided with adequate opportunities to comment on the Strategy.

Water means different things to different stakeholders. Because of the diverse nature of the South African population, several different approaches and methods were used to consult about the National Water Resource Strategy.

The main principles of consulting the vast diversity of water users across the country included consultation with the various sectors of society both at national and Water Management Area level, building the capacity of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry staff to conduct their own consultation meetings and consulting stakeholders according to ability. Information was made available to accommodate the different levels of education and in different formats, allowing the broadest range of stakeholders to comprehend the information and thus contribute meaningfully during the consultation process.

This multi-pronged approach to consultation resulted in many positive outcomes, which included gathering comments and issues regarding the Strategy from the broadest spectrum of the diverse South African population.

Background

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) has developed a National Water Resource Strategy (NWRS) as set out in Section 5 of the National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998). This Strategy, sets out proposed strategies to achieve equity, sustainability and efficiency in the use of the country's water resources. In developing such a strategy, the Department, as the national custodian of water, together with water users, will ensure that it will be able to meet the existing and future water needs of all people especially those burdened with poverty and underdevelopment. The NWRS describes the ways in which South Africa's water resources will be protected, used, developed, conserved, managed and controlled. It outlines the Department's future plans and proposes arrangements with neighbouring countries for managing rivers shared with them.

It describes how Government will deal with water allocations, water pricing and pollution control. It outlines how the demands for water will be met in future, and the institutions that will be established to allow the public to participate in water resource management. Lastly, it deals with public safety, and how disasters such as droughts and floods will be managed and their impacts mitigated.

Because the Strategy will affect the way in which everyone in South Africa uses and values water, the Department, in line with Section (5)(b) of the Act, embarked in 2002 upon a country-wide public consultation process to bring the contents of the Strategy to the attention of water users in South Africa and to invite their comments.

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The Department appointed Manyaka Greyling Meiring (Pty) Ltd (now part of Golder Associates Africa) on 1 November 2001 to conduct the public consultation process for the development of the NWRS.

Objectives

The objectives of the NWRS public consultation process were divided into initial, intermediate and final objectives. These are listed below, also indicating the good-practice public participation principles that each set out to fulfil.

Initial objectives

- To develop the necessary capacity to comment meaningfully, therefore:
 - building the capacity of Departmental personnel at its Head and Regional Offices to conduct public consultation;
 - building the capacity of historically disadvantaged and other stakeholders in the water management areas (WMAs) to conduct public consultation and to contribute meaningfully (principle: capacity building and empowerment).
- To help stakeholders understand the context within which to comment (principle: accessibility of information).
- To widely announce the opportunity for comment (principle: inclusivity).
- To identify stakeholders (principle: inclusivity).

Intermediate objectives

- To allow stakeholders sufficient time and opportunity to comment (principle: efficiency).
- To consult stakeholders according to their ability (principle: accessibility of information).