

PRESS STATEMENT

For immediate release

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Suggested head: Green Drop offers hope for turnaround and economic stimulus

South Africa's foremost funder of water and sanitation-related research, the Water Research Commission (WRC), has welcomed the release of the 2022 Green Drop Report by Minister of Water and Sanitation, Mr Senzo Mchunu, on 1 April. This is the first time the report, which provides an overview of the current state of wastewater treatment and compliance, has been published since 2014. The WRC has further reconfirmed its support to the department and wider sector in improving wastewater management in South Africa.

The public release of the Green Drop report is a positive and welcome development from the leadership to lay transparent the status quo. The picture looks grim and bleak and presents a reality of the significant number of municipal wastewater systems in a critical state in 2021 (39%) from the 995 systems assessed. This suggests the deterioration in sustainable management of wastewater and the significant risks it poses to the receiving water environments, the ecosystem, human health (e.g., recreational, religious and cultural uses) and the associated treatment costs related to the provision of potable water.

This picture may not be unexpected due to the loss of momentum and enthusiasm created from the inception of the Green Drop certification programme and the challenges associated with ageing infrastructure, poor operation and maintenance practices and growing urbanisation and population growth. However, it must be recognised that this new impetus and associated turnaround strategy offers an economic stimulus with potential job creation, as the water sector comes up with the required interventions that will close the current operational gaps and challenges.

As part of the wastewater ecosystem, the WRC has led efforts to find innovative solutions to wastewater management in South Africa since its establishment 50 years ago. The Commission is globally recognised for, among others, contributing to the biological nutrient removal (BNR) treatment process which forms the basis for today's advanced wastewater treatment technology of activated sludge, as well as its technology leadership in direct reuse. To the WRC's credit the basis of the Green Drop certification process emanated from a series of research interventions related to water and wastewater safety for the management of drinking water treatment and wastewater treatment. Today, this is the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended approach for public and private sector utilities around the world.



The WRC remains committed to providing the required technical support to the Department of Water and Sanitation's incentive-based programmes, of which the Green Drop audits are part of. This commitment is further demonstrated by the WRC's previous support of the development of the Wastewater Risk Abatement Plan, which is successfully utilised as one of the key current Green Drop assessment criteria.

The WRC has also supported various capacity building and training programmes on implementing risk-based wastewater management for several municipalities in support of the Green Drop audits. This development ushers in the opportunity to introduce new research products and processes, such as independent water and sanitation producers as an institutional modality, wastewater-based surveillance as the next rung of environmental water quality monitoring and smart 4IR (fourth industrial revolution) products tools, such as Look See Do (an app that allows experts anywhere in the world to assist and share knowledge with equipment workers in the most remote areas), emerging non-sewered and off grid sanitation technologies, to name a few, which can assist the sector in its turnaround journey.

The WRC further realises the need for key immediate interventions to support municipalities in achieving sustainable wastewater management and Green Drop status. In this regard, further strengthening of the WRC's technical support role is required to refocus this to achieve the required immediate objectives. This will include the need for a holistic understanding and analysis of the rationale behind institutional failure of municipalities to achieve Green Drop status in 2022, and the respective municipalities' needs that will assist them to improve their future Green Drop status. Such an understanding will provide an opportunity to identify the various partners and stakeholders that need to come on board in assisting municipalities address current challenges so that they achieve sustainable wastewater management.

There is also a need to redefine the capacity building and training programmes and refocus this on addressing the challenges identified during the 2022 audit process so as to ensure continuous improvement. Therefore, conceptualisation of a more focused and responsive capacity building and training programme and successful rollout of such a continuous improvement programme nationally for needy municipalities through the District Development Model (DDM) of service delivery enhancement, is urgently required so that during the 2024 audits the sector can have a measure to benchmark the impact of such an intervention. Such a continuous improvement capacity building and training programme can leverage on the already trained lead and assistant inspectors and implemented in partnership with key partners/stakeholders such as DWS, MISA (Municipal Impact Support Agent), SALGA (South African Local Government Association), DBSA (Development Bank of Southern Africa), to name a few.

Overall, the WRC remains committed to supporting the Minister, the DWS and the sector through its research, development and innovation platform. Besides supporting capacity building and training programmes designed for improved sustainable wastewater management in support of achieving Green Drop status, the knowledge generation and focused dissemination of the WRC outputs, will be critical in the organisation's technical support of the incentive-based programme. Over the medium term, there may be a need to review all the currently developed tools, manuals and guidelines and restructure them to respond to current municipal knowledge needs in support of achieving Green Drop status. In the longer term, a number of current WRC-supported research projects are focusing on

critical aspects impacting municipal operations, such as good governance; achieving a paradigm shift in wastewater management (and refocusing it as a resource); catalysing achievement of national, regional and international development plans while transitioning the water sector to a circular economy. This represents knowledge development opportunities that will provide key outcomes in support of improved wastewater management and achieving of future Green Drop status for currently struggling municipalities, and ultimately better wastewater service delivery. An improved Green Drop status will be achieved through and contribute towards an improved Zero Drop (through effective infrastructure renewal, operation and maintenance) and ultimately an higher Blue Drop status. The spin offs will include financial savings from losses of water, decreased burden of health, improved ecosystem and definitely water security.

ENDS

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