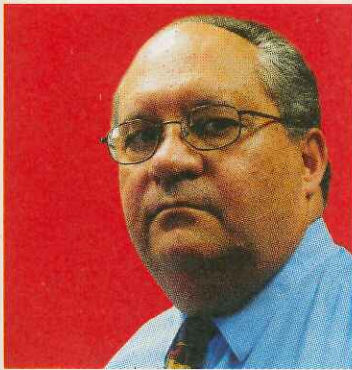


# No end in sight to South Africa's water woes

Cape Town's water crisis highlights the importance of water for sustainable economic development in South Africa.



## BY DR KOOS COETZEE

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South Africa is a dry country with very few perennial rivers. According to a Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) report, our average annual rainfall of about 450mm is well below the world average of about 860mm/year.

South Africa can be divided into wetter eastern and drier western parts, with more than 40% of the total rainfall occurring on about 10% of the total land area.

The total annual mean runoff for South Africa is estimated at 49,2 billion cubic metres. Of these, approximately 10 billion cubic metres are regarded as an 'ecological reserve', and unavailable for use as it has to remain in the rivers to maintain the natural environment along the watercourses. The total amount of water that can be abstracted from the various rivers is estimated at 13,9 billion cubic metres.

Irrigation uses 60% of this, followed by urban users (25%) and mining companies (6%). Rural areas, afforestation and power generation jointly use 9% of the total available water. In 2000, total requirement was estimated at 13,3 billion cubic metres, and the total supply at 13,9 billion cubic metres, leaving a small positive balance of 504 million cubic metres. This said, many catchment areas had a negative balance.

A 2000 DWS study predicted that South Africa would have enough water by 2025 to fulfil all its requirements. This estimate was based on increased resource development in catchment areas, improved reuse of water, and the reallocation of water to different user sections.

### A FAILED DEPARTMENT TRYING TO GET ITSELF OUT OF TROUBLE

The DWS seems positive about its ability to provide enough water for the population until 2025. Before 1998, the focus was on developing new water resources. After 1998, a new National Water Act shifted the emphasis to redressing past imbalances with regard to water access.

Irrigation farming plays a major role in supplying affordable food for our population. Up to 1994, much money was spent on developing water infrastructure. Since then, very little has been done to improve our ability to collect and conserve

water. Instead, the high use of water by irrigation and perceived low contribution of agriculture to the gross domestic product is used as a motivation for water reallocation. Clearly, the availability of water for irrigation will come under pressure from politicians.

In October 2017, the Auditor-General reported to Parliament that, when it came to infrastructure development, the DWS had spent 99,6% of its budget and achieved 28% of its goals. It spent 88,5% of the budget for water sector regulation and achieved 35% of its set goals. Out of the 10 key projects audited, not one had achieved its objectives.

In the 2016/2017 financial year, the DWS incurred a net loss of R89 million, had an overdraft of R194 million, and had racked up unauthorised expenditure of R406 million. Its liabilities exceeded its assets by R454 million, and it obtained a R2,68 billion overdraft from the Reserve Bank. Even with a new minister, the chances of this failed department shaping up in one or two years are slim.

## THE NEW WATER LICENCES WILL BE VALID FOR ONLY A LIMITED PERIOD

The DWS wants water users to change their existing water rights to water licences. There's a downside to this. Unlike water rights, the new water licences will be valid for only a limited period. Farmers should consult their legal experts before making the switch. Given the uncertainty about Article 25 of the Constitution, a cautious approach is probably the safest.

The growing urban population will put more pressure on available water resources. Farmers will find they have to compete with households for existing water and will continue to face higher water tariffs as the DWS tries to get itself out of trouble.

Farmers will have to use the water they obtain as effectively and efficiently as possible. In addition, the importance of irrigation in producing affordable food for South Africans, as well as high-value export crops, will have to be repeatedly emphasised to policymakers. ■ FW