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**COVID-19 forces the Southern Cape to shift gear – the rebuild will offer new opportunities to increase climate-change readiness**

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**The article is part of the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF) Debate Series on the correlation between some of the effects of COVID-19 and Climate Change.**

Cobus Meiring, chair of the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF) Secretariat, interviewed Anton Bredell, Minister of Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning in the Western Cape on the correlation between some of the effects of COVID-19 and Climate Change and how his Department intends to respond in a fast-changing environment.

**Cobus Meiring:** *As recently as December 2019 you, as well as your Director for Biodiversity and Coastal Management, Marlene Laros, addressed the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF) on several current and future affairs your Department is attending to, including the relevance and future of the agricultural economy and water sectors in particular, as well as accommodating the demands of a fast-growing regional population.*

*The present effects and predictions on climate change seemed difficult enough in 2019. However, the advent of COVID-19, in many respects, rapidly brought forward weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the regional environmental dispensation and we witnessed the effects thereof on a historically strong agricultural economy.*

*Please share with us your perspective on the current situation and how you think the Western Cape, and your Department in particular, can lever the impact of COVID-19 to fast-track efforts towards a climate-change ready region?*

**Minister Anton Bredell:** Nothing should distract us from the need to respond to the current humanitarian crisis. We must ensure that the people of the Western Cape are safe and cared for. In this respect we do, however, acknowledge the impacts of climate change on increasing risks and vulnerabilities, and on our ability to mobilise financial resources. This understanding informs our disaster risk management and economic development planning, with the intention to both respond to immediate needs, and ensure that the longer-term recovery is environmentally responsible, resilient and socially equitable.

The biggest risk and related to COVID-19 is re-entering pre-2020 status quo – this would be the greatest disappointment. **The biggest opportunity lies in front of us – to leverage the post-COVID-19 rebuild into one that is low carbon, resilient, equitable and just.** The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report lists a timeframe until 2030 to sort out the global climate change problem, and that means **we have nine years left after this crisis to achieve meaningful climate change mitigation. We need to flatten the CO<sup>2</sup> emissions curve in the same drastic manner that we are doing the pandemic curve.**

The Provincial Strategic Plan recognises the effect that climate change will have on our ability to achieve social welfare targets and economic growth, and therefore must ensure that our implementation efforts are aligned with the vision of a resilient society and economy. **If anything, the COVID-19 disruption forces us to shift gear and take some extraordinary steps to accelerate the benefits to be reaped from our planned economic trajectory.**

Effective implementation of the climate response will require collaborative efforts. **As with the COVID-19 pandemic response, a multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach is to be employed to ensure systemic consideration of climate risks across stakeholder groups in the Western Cape.** Engagement on climate change has previously been through the Provincial Strategic Goal 4 Working Group. The Garden Route District is encouraged to continue the engagement with the Province around climate change.

**The COVID-19 response is requiring a total reboot of our society, economy and governance. A post 2020 or Post-COVID-19 world is one we have yet to re-imagine and is all of ours to rewrite.** Our intention as DEA&DP is to continue our own involvement and response to the current evolving situation, to support the whole of government response. We want to ensure that Western Cape Government rebuilds with a new drive to embed the values required to save the younger generation (climate change risk) of our society as we are investing right now in saving the older generation (COVID-19 risk).

The Department will continue supporting research on anticipated climate change impacts under the various future climate scenarios. Of importance is to ensure that multi-hazard risks are considered in the scenario planning so that we are able to determine how impacts of climate change such as droughts, increase in temperature, sea level rise and sea storm surges, among others, will cascade to affect different aspects of the citizens' lives i.e. livelihoods, economy, health, well-being, responsiveness etc.

**Cobus Meiring:** *Changes in rainfall patterns, unpredictable weather patterns, prevailing drought in several areas and the escalating risk of invasive alien plants imply that the provision of fresh water will increasingly challenge sustainability in the Western Cape. Water is not only an important economic driver but also a frontline commodity. The availability of fresh water as a frontline essential commodity in the fight against COVID-19 sure must fast-track planning around securing a more sustainable water supply in the region. What are your thoughts on the water situation, and how can the region prepare for the even bigger threat and challenge of a changing climate?*

**Minister Anton Bredell:** Indeed, COVID-19 responses have heightened the need for citizens to have unlimited access to potable water despite a competing demand for the resource from other sectors such as agriculture, health and industry sectors. What makes it

worse, is that the pandemic is being experienced at a time when the Western Cape is recovering from the multi-year drought that started in 2015.

The national Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) is responsible for bulk water planning and implementing of water resource schemes so that the water demand for cities, industries, mining and agriculture are met. The Western Cape Government and the City of Cape Town are continuously engaging with DWS to ensure sufficient supplies for the Western Cape Water Supply System. Climate Change and Water Security has also been elevated in the Enterprise Risk Register for the province.

The Western Cape Sustainable Water Management Plan (2017/18) highlights the water security risks and identifies reprioritised areas of action. Relevant reprioritised actions focus on: ensuring the inclusion of climate change considerations in estuary management plans; development of a water sensitive design strategy and benchmarking tool for municipalities; implementation of the Western Cape Ecological Infrastructure Investment Framework (EIIF); improved monitoring and information management; minimisation of non-revenue water and water losses; a provincial integrated communication strategy on sustainable water management; commissioned an economic qualitative and quantitative valuation of selected wetlands close to the Theewaterskloof Dam; as well as various other actions to improve water resilience in the province.

It is important that in the economic rebuild, activities that are resilient, low carbon, and with low resource utilisation should be prioritised for financing, funding and resourcing. The region should be de-prioritising water-intense economic activities and continuing its successful efforts emanated from the drought.

**The Department is developing the Western Cape Ecological Infrastructure Investment Framework (EIIF) as a flagship project to address the risk of water insecurity in the province.** Ecological infrastructure refers to naturally occurring systems that deliver valuable services to people and examples include dune systems, wetlands and catchments (strategic water source areas). The EIIF seeks to coordinate investments into, and management efforts within the province's key water source areas such as Keurbooms, Karatara or the Breede River catchment. It will foster collaboration among all relevant sectors active in waterscapes in the province including CapeNature, the Department of Environmental Affairs: Natural Resource Management (DEA: NRM), the Department, Department of Agriculture (DoA), the Department of Economic Development and Tourism (DEDAT), Department of Local Government (DLG), the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), academic institutions, landscape initiatives, the private sector and NGOs. **Engagement on the framework is anticipated to unlock innovation and promote sharing of ideas around accelerating action towards improving the provincial water security profile in the uncertain climate change context.**

**One of the challenges in the strategic water source areas and catchments is the extensive growth of invasive alien plants (IAP). These IAPs increase fuel loads and pose a severe wildfire hazard. They are also intensive water users thus placing severe pressure on limited freshwater resources. In 2018, a study commissioned by the Department estimated that the potential value of water lost because of alien invasive vegetation on the Keurbooms and Karatara catchment to range into the hundreds of millions of Rands per year. This volume of water lost was projected to increase if efforts to reduce the alien invasive plants were not prioritised. The Department,**

through the EILF, is engaging landowners, Bitou, Knysna and George Local Municipalities towards setting up a sustainable mechanism to fund clearing of alien vegetation and thus ensuring increased surface runoff flowing to the rivers on these two catchments.

*Cobus Meiring: Biodiversity in the Western Cape is under a real threat not only as a result of a change in the weather, regular and devastating wildfire and the effects of a shrinking natural habitat as a result of rapid urbanisation. Are we doing enough to conserve what we have, and where do you see the role of your Department in going forward?*

**Minister Anton Bredell: The threats to biodiversity are on many-fold fronts, not all of which are easy to solve. However, large scale threats such as invasive alien species, fires in the mountain areas, and threats to our Strategic Water Source Areas (SWAs) are key and we need to invest in these regions.**

**We are working towards expanding our understanding of how climate change pressures, threats from human activities and the ability to adapt interact, in order to identify areas that are most important to conserve from a species and ecosystem persistence perspective. On the one hand, we have locations that are most important for long-term ecosystem resilience as identified by the Biodiversity Spatial Plan (BSP), and on the other, threats to this network. It is therefore important to address the specific threats whilst maintaining the integrity of the rest of the ecosystem network.**

The Department's Chief Directorate: Environmental Sustainability was a first mover to collaborate strategically with provincial Disaster Risk Management, Department of Agriculture (Landcare) and CapeNature in order to coherently focus resources on multiple overlapping risk areas including water security, loss of biodiversity, fire and flooding (including threats to life and property) as well as drought and other climate change risks to agriculture in priority areas.

**Several legislative, decision support policies and strategic planning instruments have been developed by the Department over the past strategic planning period (2015/2020) to enhance the province's environmental climate change resilience and to pre-empt future sustainability needs including:**

- Legal reform and the Western Cape Biodiversity Bill: Strengthening the mandates and roles of the Department and CapeNature, in the context of climate change and healthy biodiversity.
- Provincial Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (PBSAP) and its implementation programme is a roadmap to resilient ecosystems and ecological infrastructure that promotes sustainable development and benefits people equitably.
- Provincial Biodiversity Spatial Plan (PBSP), best science for the incorporation of biodiversity, ecological infrastructure and ecosystems considerations in development planning and land use, and environmental decision-making.
- The revision of the Provincial Protected Areas Expansion Strategy to ensure that priority habitats are secured in the long-term.
- Biosphere Reserves are supported operationally as an extension of our reach into the landscape in the sustainable human/environmental interface.

- New model for CapeNature (operational on a landscape basis beyond the protected areas)
- Local Network Platforms: Freshwater Forum, the Upper Breede Collaborative Extension Group (UBCEG), Upper Berg Network and the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF)
- Provincial Biodiversity Economy Strategy (PBES) and Communities of Practice to promote transformation and the sustainable development of communities and emergent farmers in biodiversity-based businesses.
- Provincial Coastal Management Programme: The implementation of the Coastal Management Line and the implementation of the Provincial Estuarine Management Programme.

**Cobus Meiring:** *COVID-19 highlighted the plight of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people in townships all across the Province where the availability of reliable fresh drinking water and ablution is anything but granted, whilst posing a real threat to community health. Does your Department have plans in place in coping for the insatiable demand for water and the infrastructure to supply it?*

**Minister Anton Bredell:** DEA&DP does not have the executive authority in relation to water and sanitation services, given the constitutional mandates of different spheres of government and sector departments governing water and water infrastructure. However, the department continues to motivate for the utilisation of climate change projections in water supply management by the DWS, and in promoting improved efficiencies and resilience by local governments in their water demand management efforts.

**Cobus Meiring:** The relevance of a vibrant agricultural sector is vital not only to the Western Cape, but clearly forms part of the bedrock of the South African economy. National government, however, seems to overlook nor recognise the advantages of embracing, opening up and safeguarding the future of a modern agricultural sector. Climate change will put further pressure on the viability of the regional agricultural sector. How can your Department and the Provincial Government contribute meaningfully in securing a more sustainable agricultural economy going forward?

The Climate Change Response Plan for the Agricultural Sector for the province – better known as SmartAgri, provides the backbone of the answer to this question and has just undergone an independent evaluation in terms of its efficacy and direction. This plan will continue to evolve as the situation changes as well in the provincial post-COVID-19 response. Many agricultural commodity groups and farmers are already adapting to climate change. The biggest challenges are around avoiding “lock-in” into sectors that may become obsolete. Many complicated and unanswered questions arise around the continued viability of relying on export markets in perpetuity given the reliance on fossil fuels.

Our work on understanding the risk that climate change poses to the economy of the Western Cape Province indicates that there are significant economic and social risks; however, there are significant economic and social advantages associated with investing in climate adaptation. Effective interventions can boost the economy by 15% whereas failure to invest correctly will contract the GDP by as much as 17%. Conservation Agriculture, promoted via the SmartAgri programme, is key to the sustained economic vibrancy of the agricultural sector. Even though it might not have as good a cost-benefit ratio as other

interventions, due to its high input costs, investment in conservation agriculture demonstrates a large human benefit at a household level.

In this context, the Western Cape Province through the Provincial Biodiversity Economy Strategy (PBES) and Communities of Practice are spearheading the sustainable utilisation of several indigenous species as commercial products. Apart from the established rooibos industry, initiatives are underfoot to develop and scale up the Honeybush industry, natural herbal products (e.g. Aloe, Sceletium, Cancer Bush, Bulbine, etc.) and the wildlife/game ranching industry within the context of supporting local communities and emergent farmers/ranchers.

**Cobus Meiring:** *In closure, COVID-19 highlights the importance of a strong community health sector, but climate change poses a much more serious and longer-term relevance onto DEA&DP to a sustainable Western Cape. What are your views on the situation going forward?*

**Minister Anton Bredell:** The DEA&DP has been engaging with the Department of Health (DOH) for a few years on climate change and human health matters. The provincial DOH is proving that within the SA fiscus and realities of a developing country, it has built a high degree of resilience in its baseline management and operations. Ongoing research, intelligence and monitoring of other health impacts of climate change need to be ramped up most likely with international support. Underlying health issues of the general population need to be re-prioritised as we can see that populations with high incidence of co-morbidities are more at risk – many of these are dietary and lifestyle related (diabetes, hypertension etc.), and as such a large degree of risk could be reduced in future if the health of the population is prioritised. This requires a whole of society/whole of government approach.

**While the current focus is on fighting COVID-19, we will not be going back to business as usual. The Department, through the Climate Change Directorate, is in the process of revising and updating the Western Cape Climate Change Response Strategy (WCCCRS). This is being done in a consultative way, drawing insights from some of the key sectors such as health, agriculture and transport. It will also elicit input from scientists, academia, the private sector and civil society. Discussions are already underway with the sectors and across stakeholder groups on the need to consider climate change impacts on day-to-day operations; and how they could systemically embed sustainability and resilience into performance plans.** In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, issues relating to health risk will probably occupy centre stage in all these plans. It is anticipated that these sector-specific plans will be aligned with the CCCRS. The Climate Change Directorate will be able to report progress on implementing the final strategy through the biennial Monitoring and Evaluation reports.

Just like with COVID-19, impacts of climate change will be felt at a social scale hence the importance of raising awareness of topical issues to the citizens so that they can engage from a position of knowledge. There are various Environmental Education initiatives through the Directorate of Sustainability focusing on climate change. Through these engagements, the Department seeks to engage citizens including the youth on how they can reduce their carbon footprint while also adapting to the impacts of climate change. While most of the lessons have taken place in classrooms or through face-to-face dialogue with community members, the Department will in future explore ways to tap into use of smart technology and

use of webinars and social media platforms as means of disseminating information and communicating with citizens.

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The Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF) is a public platform for environmental management entities in the Southern Cape, and a regional think tank on climate change mitigation and adaptation.

WEBSITE: Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF): [www.scli.org.za/GREF](http://www.scli.org.za/GREF)

#### MEDIA ENQUIRIES

1. James-Brent Styan: Spokesperson for the Minister of Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, Anton Bredell

Mobile: 084 583 1670

Email: [James-Brent.Styan@westerncape.gov.za](mailto:James-Brent.Styan@westerncape.gov.za)

2. Cobus Meiring: Chair of the Garden Route Environmental Forum (GREF) Secretariat

Telephone: 021 483 2820

Mobile: 083 626 7619

Email: [cobus@naturalbridge.co.za](mailto:cobus@naturalbridge.co.za)