



Opening of the Water Institute Conference Press Release by Mike Muller, Director-General of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry.

“Arts, Culture, Science and Technology’s loss is our gain!” exclaimed a delighted Mr Mike Muller, Director-General of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, in his opening address to the delegates at the Water Institute of Southern Africa Conference in the Cape Town Convention Centre on 3 May 2004.

He pointed out that many of the delegates present who got to know Ms Sonjica as chair of the Portfolio Committee from 1999 to 2003, have already told him how delighted they were to have her back in the sector. It is clear that the new Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, Buyelwa Sonjica, is not coming into the Department “cold”.

Mr Muller outlined the priorities the Department will face in the second decade of democracy. The first priority is to help local government fulfil its responsibility to deliver quality water services. Within this, there is a special role for sanitation, which has to be a focus over the next five years. The critical need is to keep new water supply and sanitation systems running.

It remains vitally important to protect and manage the water resources on which all the services depend. This will continue to be a priority in the future.

The Director-General pointed out that Municipalities will be expected to use their increased funding from the Municipal Infrastructure Grant to achieve the goals established in the Constitution. Government’s contract with the people of South Africa, promises:

- an end to the bucket system by 2006;
- an end to the water supply backlog by 2008; and
- an end to the sanitation backlog by 2010.

A particularly important focus –already confirmed by Minister Sonjica - will be to ensure that sanitation is given the priority it deserves.

The importance of sanitation was highlighted by the challenge of cholera. “There can be no doubt that the current cholera outbreak in Kanana in Klerksdorp is a result of the fact that people are still using bucket toilets,” said Muller. To make matters worse, “I can tell you from my visit there that the bucket toilets were not being well managed – they had no lids, they were not being emptied regularly, and when they were emptied, the contents were often spilt outside houses as they were carried away. In these conditions, it is hardly surprising that an imported case of cholera should spread through the community,” said Mr Muller.