

**BUDGET VOTE 32 FOR FORESTRY, FISHERIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT,
DELIVERED BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF FORESTRY, FISHERIES AND THE
ENVIRONMENT, MS BERNICE SWARTS**

15 July 2024

Honourable House Chair

Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Dr Dion George;

Ministers present;

Deputy Minister Narend Singh;

Honourable Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Nqabisa Gantsho, and Committee Members;

Members of parliament;

Chairpersons, Board members and CEOs of our Entities;

Director-General, Ms Nomfundo Tshabalala;

Team Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment;

Ladies and gentlemen

Fellow South Africans

Good afternoon

The inaugural budget vote speech of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in the 7th Administration coincides with the commemoration of Nelson Mandela month.

In this month of July, South Africans from all walks of life can honour our beloved Madiba by doing something that will make a difference in our communities.

It is befitting to start this budget vote speech by quoting Nelson Mandela when he said,

“I dream of our vast deserts, of our forests, of all our great wildernesses. We must never forget that it is our duty to protect this environment.”

Environmental Programmes

The Department, through the Environmental Programmes Branch, is focused on the creation of work opportunities through the implementation of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) projects in executing its mandate.

Through a range of EPWP projects implemented by the Department, the DFFE exceeded its 2023/24 EPWP target of creating 42 302 work opportunities as the department created a total of 80 918 work opportunities. The work opportunities created benefited 60% women and 58% youth, with 1% on persons with disabilities. Youth employment included the employment of graduates, enabling them to gain critical experience in line with section 24 of the Constitution. It is encouraging that some of these graduates were absorbed into the municipalities and other host organizations. Furthermore, the Department met its target for full time equivalents (FTEs), meaning that it was able to improve the duration of employment noting that EPWP participants are paid in accordance with the number of days worked.

The implementation of the Municipal Greening and Cleaning Programme through a partnership model with the municipalities created the most work opportunities. The partnership had the Department paying for the EPWP stipends and providing the primary project management responsibilities. The municipalities provided personal protective equipment (PPE), tools of trade and medical screening. The Municipal Greening and Cleaning Programme contributed to the waste management service delivery through daily cleaning-up and clearing of illegal hotspots.

The target of clearing areas invaded by invasive alien species was met, which holds significant impact, particularly in enhancing ecological integrity by restoring natural habitats and biodiversity. Additionally, through prioritizing follow-up clearing efforts, the Department effectively protected its prior investments in the initial clearing of areas invaded by alien plants. Through its Working on Fire Programme, the Department effectively contained wildland fires, preventing their escalation into natural disasters.

Through the same programme, the Department is raising awareness about wildland fires and the impact of climate change, for example, the frequency and intensity of fires.

The Department's achievement in exceeding the wetland rehabilitation target signifies its contribution to the protection and conservation of wetlands, enhancing their capacity to provide ecosystem services. The Department exceeded its target of nine (9) biodiversity infrastructure facilities constructed/renovated to fourteen (14). It also exceeded its achievement on biodiversity economy infrastructure facilities and overnight visitor accommodation and staff accommodation units whose target of twenty-one (21) was exceeded by one (1), to twenty-two (22). Such demonstrates the Department's commitment to balancing conservation efforts with economic development, benefiting both the environment and local communities. Furthermore, this achievement marks progress towards an inclusive biodiversity economy.

In this financial year, we have prioritized the creation of 31 075 EPWP work opportunities and 22 538 full time equivalents through the implementation of the Working for Water, Working on Fire and Working for Wetlands and the Municipal Greening and Cleaning programmes.

The Department aims to clear 295 000 hectares of land invaded by invasive alien plants and rehabilitate 23 wetlands. We will maintain the Working on Fire Programme, by suppressing at least 90% of wildfires. The Working on Fire Programme remains a priority in the 2024/25 financial year, noting that experts have already warned of the increase in the frequency and intensity of fires due to climate change.

The Department will also maintain the Working for Wetlands Programme to rehabilitate wetlands and ensure they continue to provide key ecosystem services that provide socioeconomic benefits to various communities.

Honourable Members, SANParks – one of our entities - also participates in the DFFE funded EPWP which is aimed at creating jobs targeting women, youth and people with disabilities. Under this programme SANParks exceeded all targets in the previous financial year, having employed 5 150 full-time equivalents (FTEs), employing 7 098 youth, 6 483 women and 198 people with disabilities. Over the medium term, under this programme, SANParks aims to create over 13 860 jobs targeting women, youth and people with disabilities mostly from neighbouring communities to national parks.

Forestry Management

The Department, through the Forestry Branch, working in collaboration with its social partners namely industry, labour, and other government departments, has continued the successful implementation of the five-year Forestry Masterplan. The Masterplan is essentially the transformation, growth and investment plan for the sector.

Despite initial challenges, the sector has seen remarkable investment growth with R28 billion of the R30 billion target invested by the end of the 2023/24 financial year. This excludes investment by government on the different deliverables of the Masterplan as part of providing a conducive environment for the sector to thrive.

The recapitalization of DFFE managed State plantations, including the recommissioning of Western Cape plantations, were prioritized. To date, 27 plantations covering 6,213 hectares have been transferred to communities through the Community Forestry Agreement Model. To reduce Temporary Unplanted areas in State plantations, the Department will be planting 1 800 hectares in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and in the Eastern Cape. In addition to this, 2 100 hectares will be tendered through different silvicultural regimes like weeding, pruning and thinning and eight Community Forestry Agreements will be concluded in this financial year.

In terms of new Afforestation, approximately 47,000 hectares of land in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape have been earmarked for new afforestation. The DFFE is in the process of finalizing Environmental Impact Assessments to facilitate the issuance of Water Use Licenses for planting.

A significant legislative milestone includes the President's signing of the amended National Veld and Forest Fire Bill into law. This amendment facilitates the formation of Fire Protection Associations, crucial for managing veld and forest fires effectively.

Honourable Members, a comprehensive Skills Audit Report has been developed to identify gaps and redundant skills in forestry processing and production. Additionally, a Skills Forum has been established to create and deliver short courses for landowners, SMME contractors, and small sawmillers. Courses focus on essential roles such as Forestry Production Supervisor, Safety Inspector, and Safety, Health, and Environmental Officer. Over 60 learners have enrolled, with 21 completing their training.

The Department has also partnered with other government entities such as the Department of Trade Industry and Competition (DTIC) as well as industry players to promote the use of locally manufactured timber products. The DTIC is collaborating with the industry to implement a monitoring tool to oversee timber tenders specifying local products. This initiative supports local industries and reduces reliance on imports. Furthermore, Stellenbosch University has developed timber construction courses, with additional courses in development at the University of Pretoria. The Fibre Processing and Manufacturing Sector Education and Training Authority (FP&M SETA) has approved R1.46 million for capacity building in this area.

To ensure effective utilisation of land, efforts to encourage the adoption of agroforestry practices among small growers have commenced, with the development of Agroforestry Best Practice Guidelines currently underway.

Honourable Members, the Department is implementing the National Greening Programme which aims to coordinate national, provincial and local government initiatives and those of civil society to plant, care and maintain trees and other vegetation in urban and rural settlement areas. The initiative is implemented through the Presidential Initiative: Ten Million Trees Programme which aims to plant 2 million trees every year, over a period of five years.

The programme is currently in the fourth year of implementation having planted about 3 972 2800 trees which comprise of 60% fruit and 40% ornamentals. An estimated 1 177 390 trees were planted through DFFE initiatives and other stakeholders in the 2023/24 financial year. This resulted in the creation of 4062 work opportunities as it is implemented through the EPWP. The greening programme is aimed at creating sustainable settlements, aesthetically pleasing environment and mitigating against harmful effects of climate change while addressing household food security when trees are integrated into homestead gardens.

For the 2024/25 financial year, the plan is to plant 150 000 trees through DFFE interventions and 2 million trees in collaboration with other stakeholders.

The DFFE is the custodian of the National Forest Act, 1998 (Act No. 84 of 1998) (NFA). Through this Act, the Department is committed to processing all licenses in terms of sections 7, 15 and 23 within 90 days of receipt.

Skills development

Honourable Members, from the human capital management perspective, the Department will continue to ensure that the skills of staff are developed. In the previous financial year, DFFE managed to place more than 400 youth on the Work Integrated Learning programme. The Department also implemented an internship programme which placed 232 graduates for a period of 2 years ending in August this year.

SANParks will place people development at the centre of its strategic priorities over the medium term. Key initiatives that will be implemented include; executive coaching, management development programmes, implementation of succession planning, skills audit, and staff training and development.

SANParks will also strengthen relationships with strategic partners in the skills development space such as SETAs and higher education institutions.

While the loss of key scientific and technical skills is of concern, the South African Weather Service is committed to strengthening its efforts to attract and retain key skills for a fit-for-purpose workforce and addressing the competitive nature of the meteorological environment, both locally and internationally.

The South African National Biodiversity Institute, which is one of our entities, has trained a total of 970 graduates on different key areas through the Groen Sebenza Phase II Graduate Development Programme. The Programme is a key sector intervention which is part of the Biodiversity Human Capital Development Strategy and 459 beneficiaries in the education sector were trained in biodiversity conservation.

Honourable Members, I must stress that in this financial year, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment strives to maintain an unqualified audit opinion, as expressed by the Auditor-General of South Africa, by ensuring that internal controls are monitored regularly and applied effectively.

Additionally, we aim to have an adequately capacitated and transformed workforce that is representative of South Africa's race and gender demographics. Our goal is to appoint 50% women in Senior Management Service positions and 2% persons with disabilities, thereby improving human resources capacity within the sector.

In conclusion Honourable Members, allow me to thank my colleagues in the Government of National Unity, our Minister, Dr Dion George, and Deputy Minister Narend Singh, as we are working together in leading this portfolio.

I wish to thank Team DFFE led by the Director General, Ms Nomfundo Tshabalala, the chairpersons, board members and CEOs of our Entities for executing our Constitutional mandate as it is enshrined on Section 24 of the Bill of Rights.

We will work with the Portfolio committee to ensure that the department is held accountable.

I thank you.