

## **Patricia, please call me!**

It was with interest that I read an article on News24 earlier this week about Patricia de Lille, the mayor of Cape Town, personally phoning some of the large water consumers in Cape Town to: "inform them that their water consumption was extremely high, and at a level the city could not afford" ([Ringling the changes: Cape Town mayor phones top water consumers](#)). It is of course good that she is doing this - each one of us should be doing our bit. But it must be a bit embarrassing for her? I mean this is a classical case of "the pot calling the kettle black". Why do I say so? Well, the problem given the current drought in the Western Cape, is that the City of Cape Town is by far the biggest waster of water. Let's be clear on this: any water that the largest consumers in Cape Town can trim off their current consumption is the proverbial drop in the ocean compared to the water the city wastes each day. So, who should be calling whom? That is why I would like her to call me - I think it is time that someone puts her in the picture.

Let me give some context to this. The City of Cape Town currently consumes about 860 million litres of potable water daily – this is with water restrictions in place. To produce its potable water most of the city's 'raw' water comes from inland resources such as Theewaterskloof dam (Villiersdorp) and Voëlvllei dam (Paarl). These (and other) dams form part of the overall Western Cape Water Supply System, which also supplies other towns and municipal areas as well as irrigation farmers. Raw water quality from the different sources varies considerably with some sources (such as Theewaterskloof dam) characterised by high silt content. Silt is a collection of fine material that is difficult to remove from the raw water and makes production of high-class potable water more expensive.

The website of the National Department of Water and Sanitation lists the level of Theewaterskloof dam at 31.8% and Voëlvllei dam at 38.8% this week. So it is indeed clear that the City of Cape Town is facing severe drought conditions. But, let us discuss this a little bit further....

Of the total volume of potable water consumed by the City, about 65% (thus currently around 559 million litres) flows back through the sewage system of the city. Some of this sewage is discharged directly to sea through sea outfalls such as located at Mouillepoint. The majority of the sewage is treated by the City of Cape Town in various sewage treatment works spread across the cape flats. The licensing requirements of these sewage treatment works (as set by the National Department of

Water and Sanitation) are quite stringent and require the sewage to be treated to a relatively high standard of purity. At this licensed standard of purity, this purified effluent is often of a better quality than raw water abstracted from the various sources such as Theewaterskloof dam – for one the purified effluent is free of silt. Once it is so treated what does the City of Cape Town do with this large volume of purified water? It dumps it into the sea. Yes, read that again, this water is dumped into the sea.

So, the final bit of context. The National Department of Water and sanitation wants Cape Town to reduce its consumption below 800 million litres a day. But there is a problem, the actual consumption (in spite of water restrictions) is still about 860 million litres a day. It is about this extra 60 million litres that Patricia de Lille is phoning consumers. But this is while her administration is dumping more than 500 million litres of clean, fresh water into the sea every day! Which do you believe will have a bigger impact on Cape Town's water reliability?

The National Department of Water and Sanitation is the custodian of our country's most precious resource: our water. They have been presiding over this gross wastage of fresh water as I've illustrated above. And believe you me this is not restricted to Cape Town. No, we have gross wastage of water on a scale that is simply mind-boggling taking place right across our country. All being presided over and completely ignored by the National Department of Water and Sanitation for more than a decade.

So forget about the Department of Water Affairs and Sanitation – it is completely dysfunctional and could probably not manage the proverbial piss-up in a brewery, let alone our precious national water resource. But they have a partner in crime: the City of Cape Town. Ask anyone in the country, which is the best run city in South Africa and it is likely you will get the answer: Cape Town, in the majority of cases. But, the City of Cape Town is the Water Services Authority for its municipal area. That means it (and not the Department of Water Affairs and Sanitation!) has the responsibility to ensure a reliable water supply to its consumers.

So it is the City of Cape Town who should have been planning and implementing the necessary infrastructure to ensure that its water supply is sufficiently robust to withstand a two - or three year drought. It is Patricia de Lille and her administration that should have taken action years ago to stop this gross wastage of clean, fresh water. It is Patricia de Lille and her team who should be accounting to their consumers for the fact that they have done precious little to stop this wastage and to insulate the city against drought. Forget about the best-run city in the country.

The question is: what will happen and what will the consequences be if the city does run out of water? At a time of drought, water restrictions are indeed appropriate but this is always (hopefully) against the background of adequate planning and provision by the responsible authority. Now it seems the consumers have to bear the brunt of the discomfort of water restrictions and brow beating by the mayor for the failures of her administration. Do you think she knows that she is responsible? I doubt it. Call me Patricia, call me.