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Unfolding Crisis

The current drought gripping the south-western parts of South Africa started as far back as the end of the 2015 summer when the rains expected to fall during the 2016 and 2017 winter seasons did not arrive. This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that at the same time, the demand for water in the Western Cape Province increased because of fairly rapid economic and population growth.

Together with the effects of climate change, the province's water resources are under significant pressure and a very real possibility exists that urban as well as rural communities will run out of water by March 2018, if not sooner.

As the largest user of water (incidentally not only in South Africa but globally too), the agricultural sector is an obvious and easy target for those taking part in the blame game.

Forgotten is the fact that the Western Cape is probably South Africa's most important export province in terms of agricultural products, or that the food-processing sector represents some 25% of the overall manufacturing sector output of South Africa.

Also forgotten is that agriculture and agro-processing are responsible for 18% of employment opportunities in the province and that agri-tourism in the Western Cape is a significant generator of foreign and locally-derived revenue.

As the current drought crisis worsens, panic begins to set in and an already fractured and polarised society (the unfortunate hallmarks of South Africa and the Western Cape region) goes to war with itself.

Accusations begin to fly and fingers get pointed - somebody needs to be blamed and somebody needs to pay. Half-truths and blatant lies are peddled in the press and on social media as if de rigueur. Political infighting and opportunism are the order of the day.

It is feared that the worst is yet to come for the Western Cape Province. Late summer here is normally blisteringly hot and windy, and a very real threat exists of veld fires sweeping the province and compounding the existing drought crisis.

All the warning signs indicate imminent disaster. In this time, cool heads are needed to avert a catastrophe realizing in the Western Cape.

Surprising ally?

As the first order of business for the New Year, on 4 January 2018, Agri SA was invited to a bi-lateral meeting with the Minister of Water and Sanitation, Ms Nomvula Mokonyane, to discuss the drought crisis in the Western Cape.

All preconceptions that may have existed before the meeting were swept aside when the Minister acknowledged the fundamental importance of the agricultural sector in South Africa and affirmed her view that Agri SA and Government were allies in dealing with the prevailing drought crisis in the Western Cape Province.

Certain hard realities had to be addressed, including the need for improved water use management and the fact that, in certain identified areas, farmers are undeniably known to be abstracting and using water unlawfully and to the detriment of their neighbors and the Province as a whole. Severe compliance and enforcement action against perpetrators will have to be expected - fair warning has been issued! *

While the discussions were led by well-prepared and informed presentations by the delegation of high-level officials from the Department who attended the meeting, what impressed most was the calm and purposeful way in which the Minister conveyed her appreciation for the severity of the impending drought crisis in the Western Cape and here willingness to listen and reach out to Agri SA and the agricultural sector in this time.

At the outset of 2018, the situation in the Western Cape is heading into a critical phase and

conditions are feared to deteriorate even further as the late summer heat-conditions are set to persist.

While the sense of panic and desperation deepens as the realities of this present drought are being felt by farmers and city-dwellers alike, Agri SA has (while setting aside all other differences for the time being) found in Minister Nomvula Mokonyane and her officials capable and cool-headed leaders to support and to be emulated by others.

Agri SA looks forward to working together with the Department of Water and Sanitation and, in particular, Minister Nomvula Mokonyane, in dealing with the effects of the persistent drought ravaging the Western Cape Province and adjacent areas at this time.

*(*Agri SA has consistently maintained its view that where farmers use water unlawfully, they do so at the expense of the agricultural community as a whole. As an organisation Agri SA will not defend the indefensible and strongly condemns the unlawful abstraction, storage and use of water by all persons.)*

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