

Still time to address SA's water infrastructural woes, says SAPPMA

In a recent open letter, President Cyril Ramaphosa painted a grim picture of the country's threatening water woes.

“Our existing water systems are already over-exploited as usage increases rapidly due to population growth and as more homes get connected to water. Combine this with the worsening effects of climate change and we are clearly facing a dire situation. Unless we take drastic measures to conserve water sources and promote efficient use, water insecurity will become the biggest developmental and economic challenge facing this country. Our current energy challenges will seem small by comparison. Unless we act now, we may not have water anywhere,” the president warned.



Image source: SAPPMA

R900bn to be spent on infrastructure

Human settlements, water and sanitation minister Lindiwe Sisulu announced a few days later that South Africa intends spending R900bn over the next decade to improve its water-supply and storage infrastructure and tackle a growing shortage of the resource. She also announced that a separate unit will be established to finance, manage and operate the national water infrastructure, while projects that are currently in the works will be expedited.

Commenting on these latest developments, the Southern African Plastic Pipe Manufacturers Association (SAPPMA) said they are relieved that the government is finally recognising the seriousness of the problem and are making the necessary resources available to upgrade the country's resources, but added that they were frustrated that we have reached this point of desperation.

“There is no doubt that the impact of this current crisis could have been reduced – if not completely avoided,” SAPPMA CEO Jan Venter said. He conceded that whilst drought and climate change might have aggravated the problem, a major cause is the country’s failure to upgrade and maintain its water pipes and infrastructure over the last decade. Moreover, he expressed concerns following an admission made by deputy minister of water and sanitation David Mahlobo, that the master plan announced by Minister Sisulu, is as yet unfunded and that there is no budget for the implementation of this plan.

“The Water Research Council recently confirmed that the country’s water resources in 2019 are not too much different from what it has been for the last 10,000 or so years. We started issuing warnings in 2009 already about a threatening water disaster unless urgent and corrective actions were taken. Unfortunately, our calls for action fell on deaf ears,” Venter said.

Limited lifespan of current infrastructure

SAPPMA is a non-profit industry body that represents close to 80% of the plastic pipe manufacturers in South Africa. As a self-regulating standards body, SAPPMA focuses on ensuring that the pipes produced and installed by its members have been tested and certified to meet international health and safety standards. Only pipes bearing the SAPPMA mark have been independently tested and audited to confirm that they comply with SANS / ISO standards.

“Much of the country’s water infrastructure consists of old steel and asbestos cement water pipes that were installed in the early 1960s or earlier. These pipes have a limited lifespan of no more than 50 years before they start to corrode, start to spring leaks and need to be replaced.

In South Africa and the rest of the world, plastic pipes are the material of choice to replace aging pipes and infrastructure as they do not corrode or perish, and the joints are leak-proof if installed correctly. They are available in various diameters and wall thicknesses offer a much longer lifespan, are cheaper and more efficient to install and offer significant savings to municipalities thanks to them offering less friction, resulting in lower pumping costs, less maintenance and fewer interruptions.

Municipal budgets

“We could see from our members’ dwindling sales figures over the last few years that no orders were being placed for new pipes, despite the fact that municipal budgets were allocated for upgrades and maintenance. Irregular expenditure of R13bn wasn’t accounted for in 2016 and 2017 in the Eastern Cape alone - making up almost half of the country’s wasteful expenditure of the same year. As a result, plastic pipe manufacturers were forced to close down and a significant number of jobs were lost,” Venter says.

By far the biggest culprits of wasting water are municipalities who do not repair leaks or fail to maintain their water pipelines. The Water Research Council recently conducted a survey of 132 municipalities in South Africa, which revealed that close to 40% of the country’s potable water was being lost as a result of leaks, incorrect metering and unauthorised consumption. By comparison, Australia (also classified as a water-scarce country) loses less than 10% per year.

Significant supply of water lost

“The two main causes of water loss are corrosion and the poor joining of pipes. Not only does South Africa suffer financial losses of more than R7.2bn per year, but we have lost a significant supply of water that we might never be able to replace again. Despite the good rains that have fallen in large parts of our country this past week, we can still run out of water if we

do not protect and look after what we have now as a matter of urgency. People can still live without electricity and as South Africans, we have almost started to get used to regular power cuts. But nobody can live without water. Government must realise the seriousness of the situation and plan for the generations to come through installing the correct plastic pipes that will be capable of meeting the infrastructure needs of a growing South African population,” Venter urges.

He adds that although the minister’s plans for water restrictions, drought measures and recycling of water are important, she fails to address the real cause of the country’s water crisis. Additionally, it is important to remember that plastic pipes are not just used to supply water to towns, cities and communities, but that almost all infrastructure rely on these pipes to improve people’s lives and enable day-to-day, modern living. Electricity, gas and telecommunication supply are all possible thanks to the use and installation of plastic pipes.

Much-needed wake-up call

Concludes Venter: “We urge municipalities and the water engineers writing the specifications for the pipeline upgrades to specify in their planning documents that only HDPE and PVC pipes bearing the SAPPMA will be installed. Any other pipe will be untested, runs the risk of being inferior quality and can put entire pipelines at risk. Plastic pipes that don’t clearly bear and display the SAPPMA logo are likely to contain dangerous heavy metals such as lead and cadmium, or recycle which could leach into the pipes and will almost certainly not deliver the longevity or performance that is required.

“We hope that the current crisis will act as a much-needed wake-up call to our leaders and that they will recognise the need to appoint competent, qualified technical personnel at national, provincial and municipal level. Decision-makers need to be educated and encouraged to invest in buying the best quality products they can afford and commit to a disciplined maintenance regime for pipe systems. We can turn the situation around if we work together and they are willing to listen to advice from the industry. SAPPMA’s door is always open and we are offering our assistance in any way needed. Together we can. Thuma mina!”

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