

Minister commits to tackling rhino poaching

CAPE TOWN: The Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, is "leaving no stone unturned" in tackling rhino poaching.



Speaking to the media following her Budget Vote speech on Tuesday, 28 May 2013,, Molewa said her department was looking at closing loopholes, such as gaps in legislation, clamping down on both existing and potential markets for rhino horns and by tracking poachers on the ground more smartly.

While an army taskforce already operates in the Kruger National Park to tackle poaching, the department is hoping that amending hunting regulations in the National Environmental Management Act and signing international agreements with countries where rhino horn is in demand, will further curb poaching.

The National Environmental Management Laws First Amendment Bill, currently in Parliament, aims to strengthen regulatory and enforcement provisions to prevent abuse of the hunting permitting system.

Once promulgated, the bill will make provision that a person who is involved in an illegal restricted activity, but who does not physically carry out the restricted activity, can also be found guilty of an offence.

The bill also prescribes that all specimens in transit through the country must be accompanied by the necessary documentation.

Molewa's department has also struck up an agreement with Denel to use communication devices to tackle poachers.

International agreements

In closing international markets, the department had signed agreements with China and Vietnam to curb environmental crimes, with arrests already having been made in Vietnam and horns had been seized, with some of them still dripping blood.

The department had just arrived back from Laos, where it is attempting to sign a similar agreement.

To further combat poaching, the department is also seeking to sign a memorandum of understanding with Mozambique to set up a fence along the boundary of the Kruger National Park with South Africa's neighbour.

Molewa hastened to add that such a fence wasn't aimed at negating the spirit of the Transfrontier National Park, which is characterised by parks without border fences.

She hopes to have the agreement signed as soon as possible, as her Mozambican counterparts had already postponed the signing of the agreement a number of times.

She said her thoughts were with a ranger who was shot and injured by poachers on the weekend and is in a Mpumalanga hospital recovering.

The department is also tackling smuggling in various other areas, such as in abalone, parrots, reptiles and is drafting a policy to tackle the smuggling of cycads.

Environmental impact assessments

The Director-General of Environmental Affairs, Nosipho Ngcaba, said the department was attempting to tackle the backlog in environmental impact assessments, and believed that the department had made progress.

However, Ngcaba said the demand in applications - driven by the growth in renewable energy projects - had increased to 900 applications last year, while the department can only process 400 applications a year.

Currently 1,300 active applications are being processed by the department.

Molewa said the department had introduced a streamlined environmental authorisation process to fast track the implementation of the Presidential Infrastructure Co-ordinating Commission's (PICC) Strategic Infrastructure Projects.

She said other tools, such as strategic environment assessments are being developed to further accelerate authorisations, particularly those in renewable energy resources.

Blue economy

The department would also help develop a blue economy based on the country's abundance in marine living resources. Molewa pointed out that her department's Green Paper on policy for the National Environmental Management of the Oceans was submitted to the Cabinet last year for approval.

The department is now working through the comments it received from the public, after the Green Paper was released for public comment, and would resubmit it to the Cabinet for final approval.

Budget breakdown & job creation

Molewa said the department would spend over R1.1 billion on Working on Water and linked programmes, while R406 million would be spent on Working on Fire.

She added that just from saving forests, about R3.6 billion had been saved in forests and R4 billion in saving water.

The department's People and Parks project had scored a number of successes last year.

These include the launch of a national co-management framework to enable innovative governance by conversation authorities and local communities.

The programme had also helped to facilitate co-management agreements with Nwanedi land claimants in Limpopo and the Songimvelo Community in Mpumalanga.

Over 5,800 jobs were created and 241 small enterprises assisted by provinces and management authorities through funding from the environment protection and infrastructure programme.

She said R530 million had last year been invested in rehabilitating 906 wetlands, which helped create over 12 000 job opportunities.

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