

The weight of the challenges faced within DFFE and its entities far outweigh the progress made

By **Dave Bryant** - DA Shadow Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries

Six months ago the world met in Glasgow, Scotland for the 26th United Nations Conference of the Parties on climate change. The conference was held whilst a weary and battered international community started to slowly emerge from the global COVID-19 crisis. Many important commitments were made at the congress and none more important for South Africa than the 8.5 billion-dollar pledge by the US, UK, French and German governments to help South Africa to transition away from coal based power, towards cleaner forms of energy.

Six months since this pledge was made, and we are facing a new global crisis following on from the viscous and unprovoked Russian attacks on Ukraine. This unjust assault on a sovereign nation has directly impacted the price of energy across the world and has accelerated a global scramble for additional renewable energy resources. Luckily for us as South Africa we have had six months to process the 8.5 billion dollar offer and should be way ahead of the pack. Or so one would assume. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Our portfolio committee recently heard that six months later, the ANC government is quote "still analyzing the details" of the pledge and is waiting on guidance from cabinet as to whether or not to even accept the assistance.

It is worth being reminded that South Africa remains the world's 12th highest emitter of greenhouse gases, at least 40% of which is produced by old coal-fired power stations. This generous and altruistic offer of assistance will help to fast track our just transition towards a greener and more sustainable future, but it appears that while some Ministers seem to grasp the challenges we are facing there are others who are stuck in the Jurassic period, refusing to accept help or to acknowledge the growing international backlash against coal based energy.

Last month over 400 people were killed by the unprecedented floods in Durban. The rainfall appears to have been between 4 and 8 percent more intense than normal, and this has been attributed directly to climate change by leading climate scientists from the University of Cape Town. These extreme weather fluctuations are being felt across the globe but their impact will be all the more catastrophic for the developing world. Severe drought events are also increasing across South Africa, even though they may not be attracting the same levels of attention that Cape Town did in 2018 during its drought crisis. Kgetlengrivier in the North West Province has been facing a day zero scenario for the past five years with ongoing water shortages as a result of poor planning by the local ANC controlled government. The impacts of increasing weather fluctuations caused by climate change will only serve to increase the social volatility in these already desperate municipalities

It is now glaringly evident that climate change is not something that will happen to our kids and grandkids alone. As evidenced by the severity of the recent floods and droughts, climate change is happening right now. It is vital that we prioritise the Climate Change Bill which is now before

parliament, and ensure that we are able to build climate change resilience, including both mitigation and adaptation strategies, into integrated government plans going forward. A key challenge identified during the Durban floods was the functioning of the early warning systems of the South African Weather Service. Representatives from SAWS have admitted recently that their stations are unstable and function intermittently due to ongoing poor maintenance. We have heard from SAWS that some warnings were issued prior to the Durban flood but it appears that these may not have been properly communicated to all parties. Either way, how can we have confidence in the ability of SAWS to predict large scale weather events if their stations keep breaking down? A significant amount of budget has now been allocated for capital projects within SAWS in the coming year but it is essential that the maintenance of existing stations be urgently prioritized.

All indications are that DFFE is headed for another qualified audit opinion. The Department has not improved the overall quality of performance reporting, and incurred a billion rand of irregular expenditure. The department continues to both over pay and at the same time fail to make payments across the board. Whilst we appreciate that the irregular expenditure has been reported for investigation we again call for more effective consequence management. The people of South Africa simply deserve better and officials who perform their duties negligently, fraudulently or maliciously must be held to account.

Rhino numbers in the SAN Parks managed Kruger Park have decreased by 75% over the past 10 years under this administration, and officials have admitted that these numbers will likely continue to drop. The cruel illusion of lower poaching numbers is likely only due to the fact that there are so few rhinos left to poach in the park. The vast majority of illegally trafficked horn is going to China and it is high time that this government increases the pressure on the Chinese government and compel them to do their bit to combat the flow of horn into their country. SAN Parks continues to stockpile masses of trimmed horn in secret caches across the country and we need to know what the future of these stockpiles are and whether this stock is being pilfered.

Chair, it is important to make special mention of our brave SAN Parks rangers who put their lives on the line every day and form the thin green line in the battle against poaching. Unfortunately, these anti-poaching teams in Kruger will continue to be on the back foot while 87 ranger posts remain unfilled. Surrounding rural communities are desperate for jobs and the ongoing vacancies are simply unacceptable.

SANParks senior management have admitted that they are overstretched and do not have the resources at their disposal to properly protect their animals. The financial hardship and low morale amongst rangers has sadly led to some staff being lured into working with poaching syndicates and recent investigations have exposed sophisticated criminal networks operating within SAN Parks. The DA continues to call for the proper implementation of polygraph testing for SANParks staff to disincentivise rangers from working with poachers. The CEO of SAN Parks remains suspended on full pay while his internal disciplinary drags on and this must be resolved as a matter of urgency in the interest of all parties involved.

Many landfill sites across the country remain in terrible condition with at least four illegal landfills currently being investigated by the department. There is an urgent need to prioritise both the approval of new landfills and the maintenance and improvement of existing landfills across the country.

Government must do better in decreasing the amounts of waste going to landfill by promoting and facilitating separation at source projects. It is not right that the private sector continues to import large amounts of plastic waste from SADC countries to fill their recycling plants whilst we contribute a comparatively small amount. Plastic waste clogs up our landfills, ends up in oceans and wetlands and is ingested by wildlife. Government should be aggressively rolling out recycling initiatives across the country and it is high time that we follow the example of other African countries like Kenya and implement a complete ban on single use plastic bags instead of having to continue to conduct oversight and monitoring of the ineffective plastic bag tax, which was recently exposed to be dogged by 10 million rands in fraudulent activity.

The fallout from the UPL fire that followed on from the riots last year has resulted in the complete devastation of the Umhlanga Lagoon and surrounds. The majority of indigenous wildlife have been killed and it will take many years before any sort of rehabilitation is possible. The response from the local municipality was woefully inadequate and we simply cannot allow for this to happen again.

It is heartening to hear that an Action Plan has now been developed to deal with land invasions in forestry plantations and that this has been identified as a significant barrier to improving the forestry sector. Again, it appears that there is a lack of agreement in cabinet as to who should bear the responsibility to address certain land invasions in plantations, such as in Grabouw in the Western Cape.

Whilst many South Africans struggle with unemployment and rising inflation 33 posts have been removed from forestry branch which will make the rollout of the Forestry Master Plan more difficult. The forestry sector has the potential to create many new jobs yet the department appears to have done away with their ambitious job targets which appears to show that the potential growth in this sector is still a long way away. There remains a target to plant 120,000 trees for the coming year which appears to be setting the department up for failure when they were only able to plant 40,000 trees in previous years. How they will now plant three times this with limited staff has yet to be seen.

The department has shrunk the budget for Marine Protected Areas and reduced the budget of the Monitoring, Control and Surveillance sub-programme. This will inevitably affect enforcement operations and it appears that the department is effectively giving up on the fight against the poaching of crayfish and abalone while coastal communities continue to be wracked by the impacts of criminal gangs and drugs associated with poaching.

The results of the long awaited Fishing Rights Allocation Process have left many traditional fisherfolk without any income and no exemptions to continue to fish while their appeals are being heard. We sincerely hope that the Minister will take their appeals seriously at the end of this month and not leave more families destitute in these increasingly desperate economic times.

Of all the directorates, biodiversity and conservation is getting the worst deal. This was supposed to be a priority area and was originally mentioned as such by the president during his honeymoon phase, yet it seems the tune has now changed. We've seen the budget for biodiversity and conservation being reduced by 14% in 21/22 and now a whopping 58.4% reduction for 22/23. This is a massive blow for our fragile ecosystems.

Finally, the dithering over the future of the Esemvelo Estuary Mouth brought many local farmers to the brink of destitution and led to land invasions earlier in the year into the surrounding park. Government was only saved by the natural breaching of the mouth which was caused by the unprecedented flooding in April.

The DA welcomes the steps taken to finalise and publish the White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Resources emanating from the High Level Report on the management of lion, elephant, leopard and rhino. The implementation of the report has been long outstanding and has caused anxiety and uncertainty for many and it is good to see that steps are now being taken to address this.

We would also like to commend the Minister on her conciliatory approach to dealing with issues that involve communities, particularly regarding outstanding land claims. The steps taken to include the welfare and well-being of wildlife should also be commended.

While some steps have been taken in the right direction, the weight of the challenges faced within DFFE and its entities are manifold. Real progress will only start to happen when there is willingness to address the core issues within many of the directorates and an agreement within the cabinet on key issues such as climate change, conservation and biodiversity. We do not have the luxury of time anymore, and decisive, courageous and urgent steps must now be taken by government to pull our environment back from the brink.