



30 May 2018

Cape Town recognised world-wide for its drive toward sustainable water management

At the beginning of 2018, Cape Town made international headlines for all the wrong reasons. It became known as the first major city in the world that could run out of water. Just six months later, that picture has changed completely. Cape Town is now being hailed for its efforts in avoiding Day Zero, and for the steps it has taken to manage its water consumption and plan its future water supply to ensure the city never has to face a similar situation again.

This success is due to a two factors. The first was to actively drive down consumption, which the City has done with greater success and in less time than any other city in the world. From an average of 1 200 million litres a day (MLD) in 2015, to 900 MLD a year ago, Cape Town is now using just over 500 MLD. This amounts to a reduction of 400 MLD in the past year.

The second was to become more resilient in the face of ongoing climate uncertainty by diversifying water supply. The City's New Water Programme incorporates desalination, water reuse, groundwater use, and the harnessing of spring water. Currently, around 24 MLD from these additional augmentation projects is feeding into the municipal system. This figure is expected to rise to 100 MLD by the end of the year, and to 150 MLD by April 2019.

The City's augmentation programme has achieved in four months what would usually take two years in terms of project development and progress.

While we must all continue to save water as the augmentation projects come online and winter rainfall begins to replenish our dams, we are no longer in any immediate danger.

It is now important to address the lingering perception that Cape Town is still at risk of running out of water. This perception is harmful to the City's economy, and to the jobs that depend on it. Before the water crisis, Cape Town was renowned not only as a tourist destination, but also as a premier events destination, attracting large numbers of participants from across the country, and abroad. The water crisis resulted in event organisers and participants questioning whether they should still be coming to Cape Town. There was a perception that hosting and attending these events would place additional strain on the City's water resources, and that supply should be saved for local consumption.

These fears are no longer justified. In fact, staying away would be more detrimental, as these events and the jobs they support are a significant mainstay of Cape Town's economy. We have managed to avert a water crisis, and we want to make sure that the aftermath of that crisis does not result in an economic crisis.

I would like to assure all event organisers that hosting their events in Cape Town will not have any detrimental impact on the water supply. Given the scale of the City's supply system, increased visitor numbers over a limited period of time (usually only a few days) will not have any noticeable impact on overall consumption.

It is possible to balance the sustainable supply of water with supporting our economy and creating employment.

The City is therefore working closely with organisers to ensure that all events have a minimal impact on municipal water usage. Additional criteria have been introduced for permit applications. When applying for a permit, all event organisers are required to submit a water plan detailing their water conservation measures, including their plans to make use of alternate water sources to minimise the use of municipal water.

We have been impressed by the response.

In many instances, event organisers have proposed a number of innovative solutions to become completely water neutral. These measures include:

- the installation of rainwater tanks,
- small-scale desalination,
- reuse of grey water,
- use of chemical toilets,
- use of waterless hand sanitiser,
- use of biodegradable, disposable crockery and cutlery, and
- supplying water from outside the province.

The hospitality industry, which forms part of the events value chain, has also implemented significant measures to reduce consumption at their establishments, and all visitors staying at the various establishments are subject to the same water-saving measures as locals.

Such measures should not only be regarded as temporary, emergency measures. We all need to fundamentally reconsider our attitude to water. Saving water, finding innovative ways to use less or reuse it, needs to become entrenched in every aspect of our lives.

We are not alone in this. A survey conducted in 2014 of the world's 500 largest cities shows that one in four can be considered "water-stressed". Climate change, population growth and human activity all play a role in this. Our challenge is therefore to find ways of becoming more sustainable, more resilient.

As outlined earlier, the City of Cape Town is diversifying its water augmentation programme to reduce dependency on groundwater sources:

- In the short term, we will have 16ML/day desalination capacity up and running over the course of the next two months. This will come in the form of rented modular desalination plants that will operate over the next two years (until 2020). Significant preplanning is also underway to allow for fast-tracked implementation of larger-scale augmentation schemes in the long term.
- For the medium term, we are working to ramp up alternative water supply to over 150 ML per day before winter 2019, the bulk of which will come from aquifer abstraction, but will include desalination and water reclamation components. This, in conjunction with some level of continued water restrictions, will help our dams recover to the point where there is a reasonable buffer against further drought post 2020.
- In the longer term, i.e. post 2020, it is expected that the combination of augmentation schemes and the return of normal rainfall will have allowed the dams to recover significantly. We will continue to abstract groundwater as required, while ensuring that the aquifers are sufficiently recharged to avoid depleting them. A programme of large-scale permanent desalination and water reclamation plants will be ready to be fast-tracked if required.

Some level of water restriction may still be necessary during any droughts we experience beyond this date. It is therefore important that we continue to save water into the future.

The most effective way of doing this is through behaviour change. The City is driving a far-reaching programme to communicate the required behaviour change to its residents. Local businesses and other stakeholder groups are being engaged to assist in spreading the message. The events and hospitality industries play a crucial role in disseminating the message to visitors, and encouraging them to "save like a local".

We have not allowed this crisis to define us, but the way in which we are responding to it may well be our defining moment.

So, I would like to urge event organisers to put the following message out there: Cape Town is open for business. The events industry provides enormous economic benefit to the local economy, and we cannot afford to jeopardise this due to misinformation about the realities of our water situation.

We welcome your support, and the visitors you bring to our city. We welcome your willingness to come forward with solutions to save water, and we admire the innovative proposals we are seeing.

Let us keep working together to make progress possible.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ian Neilson', written over a horizontal line.

Alderman Ian Neilson
Executive Deputy Mayor, City of Cape Town