



## MEDIA STATEMENT

### **DWS is engaged in several initiatives to address the pollution of rivers by municipal waste water treatment systems**

For immediate release

06 July 2023

The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) notes AfriForum's statement that it has expanded its scope of test sites on the Vaal River from the initial site in the Ngwathe Local Municipality with five more points downstream (in Free State, Northern Cape and North West) and that its test results have confirmed the presence of cholera bacteria.

The DWS released its Green Drop report in 2022, which indicated that the performance of many municipal waste water treatment systems is deteriorating. The report identified 334 wastewater systems in a critical state of performance, in 90 municipalities. This means that many municipalities are discharging effluent from their waste water (sewage) treatment works which does not meet the specified treatment levels, which in turn is resulting in pollution of rivers. The Vaal River is one of the worst polluted rivers in South Africa.

Outbreaks of cholera are caused either by people ingesting sewage-polluted water, or by faecal-oral means - through poor hygiene, eating contaminated food, or by coming into contact with the faeces of an infected person. Sewage pollution of rivers can result in cholera bacteria entering the rivers via the faeces of an infected person or people.

DWS has been carrying out weekly tests for cholera in the Vaal River at the point in Ngwathe where AfriForum tests initially indicated the presence of cholera bacteria, which was caused by a sewage-spilling manhole (which has since been repaired) situated near the watercourse. DWS tests at the site have not yet identified cholera bacteria. However, this does not mean that the AfriForum tests were incorrect. Cholera-infected faeces can be present at a particular point in the river at a particular time but may later flow downstream. DWS will conduct further tests downstream.

DWS would like to remind members of the public that rivers, dams, and streams contain raw (untreated) water, and this water is not suitable for human consumption. We therefore urge members of the public to avoid consuming untreated water from such water bodies unless it is first disinfected. The National Institute for Communicable Diseases has set out guidelines that should be followed regarding safe drinking water.

Municipalities are required by law to carry out regular tests of treated drinking water before it is provided to communities. Drinking water provided by municipalities is safe to drink if municipalities are carrying out the tests as required and if the tests show that the water meets the standards for drinking water that are set by the South African Bureau of Standards.

**WATER IS LIFE – SANITATION IS DIGNITY**

**SOUTH AFRICA IS A WATER-SCARCE COUNTRY**

Beyond producing the Blue, Green and No Drop monitoring reports, DWS is engaged in several initiatives aimed at addressing the problem of pollution of rivers by municipal waste water treatment works. Firstly, the Minister has agreed on action plans to address infrastructural deficiencies in many of the worst performing municipalities, and DWS is assisting municipalities with funding from the Water Services Infrastructure Grant (WSIG) and Regional Bulk Infrastructure Grant (RBIG) to address these deficiencies. Secondly, DWS is taking regulatory action in terms of the National Water Act, including issuing non-compliance notices, directives, taking civil action, and as a last resort, laying criminal charges against polluting municipalities. Thirdly, DWS is drafting amendments to the Water Services Act to strengthen its role as the regulator of municipal water and sanitation services and to enable the Minister to intervene effectively when there is non-compliance with directives to stop pollution.

**Issued by the Department of Water & Sanitation**

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