

New Certification System Improving SA's Water

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drop



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The Department of Water & Environmental Affairs' (DWEA's) new Blue Drop Certification system hopes to encourage municipalities to improve their drinking water quality management while empowering the public with the right information about what is coming out of their taps.
Compiled by Lani van Vuuren.

The inaugural *National Blue Drop Report 2009* was launched by newly-appointed DWEA Minister Buyelwa Sonjica earlier this year. A total of 22 water supply systems across South Africa were awarded the prestigious Blue Drop following the assessment period, which ran from March 2008 to January 2009.

The certification process judged municipalities' water supply systems on criteria such as the skills levels of process controllers, operation and maintenance, operational and compliance monitoring, number of key analyses per population serviced and proof that these analyses

results are used to improve process controlling, among others. The process proved that while there are areas which require urgent intervention, tap water remains safe to drink in most cities and towns in South Africa. A nationwide average of 93% was achieved with regards to compliance with the microbiological limits of the national standards for drinking water quality (SANS 241).

"Given the skills challenges that face the sector, I am encouraged by the content of this report which indicates what is possible in spite of the challenges we face," noted Sonjica. "It is evident that a

CURRENT WATER SUPPLY SYSTEMS WITH BLUE DROP STATUS:

Bitterfontein
Caledon
Cape Town
Ekurhuleni
Franschhoek
George
Greater Durban
Greater Johannesburg
Loxton
Maselspoort
Matsulu

Nelspruit
Paarl Mountain
Paradyskloof
Peddie at Kings Lynn
Plettenberg Bay
Pretoria
Primkop
Potchefstroom area
Sandile
Sundumbili
Worcester

Source: National Blue Drop Report 2009

mountain of challenges can be shifted if the required passion is available." It is particularly noteworthy that a wide variety of water supply systems were awarded certification, including two small rural systems, Peddie (Amathole District Municipality) and Loxton (Ubuntu Local Municipality). This is proof that it is not impossible for smaller systems to achieve Blue Drop status.

"The Blue Drop report should not be regarded as just another document produced by government, but should be deemed as evidence that the department, with its partners, are serious about regulation, and serious about our responsibility to improve the manner in which the drinking water of the South African people is being managed," said Sonjica. The Minister expressed her satisfaction with municipalities' general positive attitude towards the certification programme.

It is important to note that failure to achieve Blue Drop status does not necessarily mean that the municipality does not comply with drinking water standards. However, generally, those municipalities with higher Blue Drop scores achieved better sustained water quality. In general, areas supplied by

water boards fared better than those municipalities who are responsible for their own water supply.

"Low-scoring municipalities will be placed under close surveillance with the objective of ensuring improvement."

A total of 54 water services authorities failed (or were unable) to present the DWEA with the required information for Blue Drop certification assessment. These authorities have automatically achieved a zero blue drop score and their water supply systems will be subject to a strict regulatory audit in coming months.

Provincially, Gauteng fared the best out of all the provinces, with the vast majority of citizens being served from Blue Drop certified water supply systems (the provincial average Blue Drop score is 74,4%). According to the report the performance of the water boards, which includes Rand Water (Africa's largest water utility), in the province have contributed to this achievement. However,

the advantageous position of the three metropolitan municipalities (Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni) to have highly-skilled municipal officials employed to manage drinking water quality is an important contributing factor. Provincial average drinking water quality compliance is 96,2%.

KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape are in the second and third places respectively, with the former achieving an average Blue Drop score of 73% and the latter 60,3%. In KwaZulu-Natal DWEA's drinking water quality regulation unit noted that while the majority of the province's water institutions performed well during assessments, concern remained over some of the rural areas where formal services have not been introduced, since the unserved communities remain at risk to waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera. In general, the unit identified inadequate process control as a reason for municipal water supply systems not achieving Blue Drop status.

In the Western Cape municipalities complied rather well, with the City of Cape Town and George municipality achieving a score of 100%. The few low-scoring municipalities will be placed under close surveillance with the objective of ensuring improvement.

Eastern Cape municipalities achieved an average score of 50%, while average drinking water quality compliance was 91,6%. The Blue Drop performance of water services institutions in this province varied from surprisingly well to expectedly poor. Interestingly, neither Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality nor Buffalo City obtained Blue Drop status (water quality supplied by both these systems is well within the limits of the national standard, however). The drinking water quality regulation unit expressed concern over the actual quality of water in Jansenville and Klipplaat (both under jurisdiction of Ikwezi Local Municipality), since recurring bacteriological failures have been noted.

Mpumalanga has been hardest hit by various diarrhoea outbreaks over the past few years (notably Delmas, Carolina and Bushbuckridge). The Blue Drop scores for the various systems varied from exceptional to poor, however, the actual compliance is reason for concern since insufficient data prevents the department from calculating credible compliance. The same unease was expressed for Free State municipalities, where 12 water services authorities failed to adhere to the call to be assessed.

In Limpopo, where huge challenges have been faced during recent cholera outbreaks, the highest Blue Drop score was 64%. "This is a clear indication of the amount of effort and investment required before high confidence levels could be instilled in the drinking water quality management by the responsible authorities in this province," said the DWEA.

The North West and Northern Cape achieved the lowest Blue Drop scores (40% and 28,3% respectively). While there were several elements of promise in the North West only the water supply system of Potchefstroom was awarded Blue Drop status. With regards to the Northern Cape, the department believes there is reason to be concerned about the capability levels of most water services authorities in this province to manage drinking water quality efficiently. However, in general, the microbiological compliance of drinking water was still satisfactory in this province.

"The incentive-based regulatory approach is a first for South Africa. We are still in our infancy with this approach and the concept must be further developed towards perfection" reported Sonjica. "Revealing the performance of individual municipalities has ensured that the public at large has confidence in tap water quality. It has also resulted in authorities and providers upping their game towards higher levels of efficiency since the assessments started."

LAINGSBURG – THE SMALL MUNICIPALITY THAT COULD

The Municipality of Laingsburg, in the Karoo, is put forward as a good example of the energy the Blue Drop certification programme has brought into the South African water supply landscape.

This municipality is responsible for services in the rural towns of Laingsburg and Matjiesfontein, in the Western Cape. In November last year, Laingsburg was assessed and scored 0% compliance with regulatory criteria. This was an indication that water quality management was not anywhere near the top of the municipality's agenda.

However, the water services institution used the five months to the final assessment round to good effect to get maximum requirements in place. Municipal officials came prepared to the final assessment, to the extent where Matjiesfontein scored 70,7% and Laingsburg 44,5%. While this is still well short from obtaining a Blue Drop, the massive improvement is what the DWEA is intending to ignite all over South Africa with the regulatory initiative.

Source: National Blue Drop Report 2009

PROVINCIAL AVERAGE BLUE DROP SCORES

Province	Provincial Average Blue Drop Score (of WSAs assessed)	Provincial Average drinking water quality compliance	Nr of WSAs that failed (or was unable) to present required information for assessment (0% Blue Drop score)
Gauteng	74,4%	96,2%	3
KwaZulu-Natal	73%	82%	1
Western Cape	60,3%	91%	3
Eastern Cape	54,3%	91,6%	6
Mpumalanga	51%	84,58%	11
Limpopo	40,8%	<86%	5
Free State	40,3%	95,5%	12
North West	40%	71,5%	5
Northern Cape	28,3%	<93%	8

Source: National Blue Drop Report 2009

A parallel effort is underway for wastewater services and, at the time of writing, the Green Drop report was being finalised. Green Drop status has proven much more difficult to achieve. "For too long wastewater treatment has been out of the public eye, allowing authorities to under-invest in the adequate maintenance

of this essential service. However, a count of 30 wastewater plants qualifying for Green Drop status to date is encouraging, proving that excellence is possible," noted the Minister.

To access the National Blue Drop Report 2009 Visit:

www.dwaf.gov.za/dir_ws/DWQR/

