

# BLUE DROP:

Slow but steady progress  
in restoring SA's drinking water quality



*The results of the 2011 Blue Drop certification programme, in which the country's municipal drinking water treatment systems are evaluated, have been made public.*

*Lani van Vuuren summarises the results.*

An innovation of the Department of Water Affairs (DWA), the Blue Drop certification programme for drinking water treatment systems was introduced along with the Green Drop certification programme for wastewater treatment plants in 2008 as an incentive-based regulation system to improve municipal drinking water quality and wastewater management. According to Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, South Africa's municipalities are increasingly embracing the programme. This is evident in the fact that 914 water supply systems were assessed this year compared to 787 in 2009.

The certification programme works by measuring and comparing the results of the performance of water services authorities and their providers. Specially appointed assessors visit each water treatment plant, and score it according to a list of set criteria. Municipalities are subsequently awarded (or penalised) upon evidence of their excellence (or failure) according to the minimum standards of requirements that have been defined.

This year, 66 water supply systems were awarded Blue Drop Certificates (compared to 38 systems in 2010). It is interesting to note the increased number of awards despite the fact that some municipalities were unable to hold on to their Blue Drop status and the fact that requirements are becoming more stringent with every assessment cycle. At the same time, the number of water supply systems that achieved scores of more than 50% increased to 536 or 50%, compared to 47% in 2010.

The process has once again proved that municipalities do not necessarily have to be metro-sized with the latest technologies to produce drinking water of excellent quality. In fact, some of the best

performers of the year have been smaller local authorities. Rather, the secret to success seems to be committed and diligent technical staff supported by dedicated councillors. The increased political support on the ground level for the Blue Drop certification process could also be seen in the number of local councillors who participated in the recent Third Municipal Water Quality conference, held in Durban.

"In my view our incentive-based regulatory approach has succeeded in raising overall awareness that will lead to sustainable improvement in the management of drinking water quality across the country," said Molewa. "We now have 100% municipal coverage. This means that for the first time, the Department of Water Affairs as the national regulator has a complete database of exact strengths and gaps per municipality and per water supply system from where gradual and sustainable improvement can be monitored."

Speaking at the Third Municipal Water Quality Conference, where the results were made public, DWA Chief Director: Water Services, Helgard Muller, said that a general positive trend could be seen in the results. This was very encouraging for the regulator. "The challenge now is to work with those municipalities who are consistently underperforming and bring them up to standard. This will require a concerted effort by the department and the municipalities concerned."

While DWA would not hesitate to take legal action against municipalities who put their constituents at risk by providing sub-standard quality drinking water, this was a lengthy and expensive process, noted Muller. "Court cases can drag on for years, and while they are ongoing inhabitants of a particular town or city are still subjected to substandard

services. The challenge is to find a way of resolving problems quickly and efficiently."

## PROVINCIAL RESULTS

Residents of the Western Cape can rest assured that their drinking water is of top quality after the province scooped 29 Blue Drop awards in the recent round of assessments out of a total of 66 Blue Drops awarded. This is 21 more than its nearest competitor. Interestingly, while the City of Cape Town boasted the highest provincial Blue Drop score (98%), it is the smaller Witzenberg Municipality that walked away with the highest number of awards (5).

While it did not achieve as many Blue Drops for its water treatment systems, municipalities in Gauteng, where close to 40% of the country's drinking water is treated and supplied through 32 supply systems, did achieve the highest overall provincial score (95%) compared to the Western Cape's 94%. Significantly, Gauteng has no critical systems (i.e. scoring lower than 33%).

Third on the provincial performance log is KwaZulu-Natal, who managed 7 Blue Drops and a provincial score of 80%. eThekweni Metro was the best achiever in the province, with a score of 96%. Unfortunately, the province's high overall score is skewed

**"For the first time, the Department of Water Affairs as the national regulator has a complete database of exact strengths and gaps per municipality and per water supply system from where gradual and sustainable improvement can be monitored."**

### THE BLUE DROP TOP TEN MUNICIPALITIES

1. City of Johannesburg
2. City of Cape Town
3. Ekurhuleni Metro
4. Witzenburg Local Municipality
5. West Coast District Municipality
6. Tlokwe Local Municipality
7. George Local Municipality
8. Mogale City Local Municipality
9. Bitou Local Municipality
10. Emfuleni Local Municipality

as the high-scoring municipalities are balancing a few very low scores, which DWA has noted with concern. Still, seven systems obtained Blue Drops compared to only one last year, while 138 systems scored more than 50% with 22 systems scoring more than 90%.

The Eastern Cape is fourth on the national list of performance, with Buffalo City (East London) coming out tops with a score of 91%. While the province did manage to raise four Blue Drops, overall performance declined somewhat compared to 2010. According to DWA, 44 systems in the Eastern Cape require attention, and the overall business of drinking water quality management is “not in a healthy space.” It is encouraging to note, however, that the percentage of systems which scored less than 33% have decreased from 74% (in 2010) to 49%.

The Maluti-a-Phofung municipality is the best performer in the Free State, with a score of 89%. Through the Blue Drop process, municipalities in this province are renewing their operational baselines and reprioritising their plans with the aim of raising their current performance status in terms of municipal drinking water quality management. The Free State continued its upward trend from last year, with the province scoring 64% compared to only 40% in 2009. Despite this improvement, however, the majority of systems in the province still scored below 50%, which is not

a commendable position. The good news is that 24% of systems now fall in the ‘excellent’ and ‘very good’ categories, compared to only 5% in 2010.

Lower on the provincial log is Limpopo, where Polokwane achieved the best score (92%). While the overall impression is one of commitment to the certification process, there are still pockets of poorly performing municipalities, according to DWA. A total of 18 systems in this province require urgent attention, however, on the other side of the scale 30% of systems are now in an excellent or very good state (up from 0% in 2009).

The North West provincial score is slightly down from 2010 – from 66% to 62%. Tlokwe Municipality achieved the highest score (97%), with a total four Blue Drops being awarded in the province. A positive development is the fact that 67% of systems scored more than 50%.

Municipal water system performance varied from excellent to good in the Northern Cape, with Frances Baard municipality achieving the highest score (95%). The province shows one of the most progressive inclines in Blue Drop performance since 2009, and DWA is encouraged by the quality of evidence that has been submitted by a number of municipalities. Unfortunately, the province is still lagging slightly behind, and did not manage to attain any Blue Drops this year, although two systems managed scores above 90%.

According to DWA’s assessment Mpumalanga is one of the few provinces which do not seem to be on par with objectives to ensure continued improvement – the province showed a drop in provincial score from 65% to 57%, resulting in it being in last place on the national log. “Renewed effort and resources will have to be applied to turn around this undesirable trend.” As in the other provinces Mpumalanga also has star performers, like Steve Tshwete Local Municipality who managed a score of 97%. A total of 8 Blue Drops were awarded in the province.

The department has now set its sights on improving those systems that scored least in the assessment. “I will engage at political level with the newly-elected mayors and councillors of such municipalities, while officials of my department will apply the necessary regulatory measures and support tools to rectify the situation,” noted Molewa.

Assessments will be undertaken again this year and revealed at next year’s biennial conference of the Water Institute of Southern Africa.

To see the results for your municipal area, Visit: [www.dwa.gov.za/bluedrop](http://www.dwa.gov.za/bluedrop) or [http://www.ewisa.co.za/frame.aspx?url=misc/BUE\\_GREENDROPREPORT/bluedropindex.htm](http://www.ewisa.co.za/frame.aspx?url=misc/BUE_GREENDROPREPORT/bluedropindex.htm)

Look out for the November/December edition of *the Water Wheel* when we will provide an overview of the Green Drop certification results. □

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PROVINCIAL PERFORMANCE

Province	Provincial Blue Drop score	Blue Drop awards 2011
Gauteng	95%	7
Western Cape	94%	29
KwaZulu-Natal	80%	7
Eastern Cape	77%	4
Free State	64%	3
Limpopo	64%	5
North West	62%	3
Northern Cape	62%	0
Mpumalanga	57%	8

Source: 2011 Blue Drop Report