

SA's Top Water Women Honoured



South Africa's top water women for 2005. Standing is Thelma Mavimbela and Prof Maggy Momba; sitting is Portia Mphephu, Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry Buyelwa Sonjica, Lungile Mthembu and Sethe Mothibi-Thinane.

On 18 March five women were honoured for their contribution to the South African water sector during the fourth annual Women in Water Awards. The awards, which have become one of the highlights on the National Water Week calendar, were hosted by the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry and sponsored by Eskom.

Speaking at the ceremony Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry Buyelwa Sonjica lamented the fact that, despite the progress that has been made during the last ten years, the percentage of professional women in the water field remains small. "Gender representivity is still inadequate. Women make up about 52% of the adult population in South Africa. Yet, they only hold 15% of all executive managerial posts. The water sector faces a particular challenge as it is viewed as mainly a technical field, traditionally

dominated by men," she said. "We need to balance this reality through a progressive and active approach in transforming certain sections of the water sector, particularly in the engineering and scientific fields, with special emphasis on opportunities for women from historically disadvantaged communities. We need to strengthen the participation of women in the management and policy fields, and we need to create meaningful opportunities for women, particularly the young ones, in the research arena."

THE WINNERS OF THE WOMEN IN WATER AWARDS WERE:

Prof Maggy Momba in the Research Category (35 years and older)

Prof Momba has contributed significantly to scientific knowledge in terms of research and publications in areas of health-related water microbiology, water use and waste water management.

Following the completion of her Masters degree in 1995 and her PhD



Prof Maggy Momba (right) receives her award for the research category (35 years and older) from Water Affairs & Forestry Minister Buyelwa Sonjica.

degree in 1997, she joined the University of Fort Hare. Despite a heavy teaching load, she established a research programme on Water Quality Management in the Eastern Cape. This has led to the establishment of one of the largest black post-graduate programmes at Fort Hare University, including a molecular biology laboratory.

Among others, Prof Momba has investigated why the water supply in South Africa's rural areas may influence the quality of container-stored water and consequently cause infection and disease in the communities. She has also conducted a comparative study which led to improved knowledge on the impact of pipe materials on densities of fixed bacteria, and helped drinking water producers in South Africa to choose pipe materials that reduce the possibility of biofilm development.

In 2002 and 2003, researchers from the universities of Fort Hare and KwaZulu-Natal and Umgeni Water investigated, under her leadership, the cause of inadequate disinfection at the Alice Water Treatment Plant. Her latest study is aimed at improving

the efficiency of disinfection in small water treatment plants. This is currently being conducted by a research team from the universities of Fort Hare and Venda, Umgeni Water and CSIR under her leadership.

According to Prof Momba, a crucial aspect of her work is bringing scientific understanding and knowledge down to the lowest level. For this reason, her department has initiated a training programme for the operators of rural water treatment plants, to start in June. "It is becoming increasingly important that, as we improve the technology of these water treatment works, the operators are trained accordingly. No level of sophistication will bring sufficient quality water to rural communities if the operators do not know how to manage these plants properly."

Lungile Mthembu in the Research Category (under 35 years)

Mthembu started working for Umgeni Water in 1996 as an in-service trainee. Since then she has been working in the scientific services division as a microbiologist. Through the years she has contrib-

uted a great deal to the training and development of technikon graduates as well as clients of Umgeni Water. She has been involved in a number of scientific research projects relating to water, and has worked extensively in microbiological method development, evaluation and validation.

Her passion for quality in water microbiology landed her an opportunity to prove herself when she successfully implemented the SANAS 17025 standard for two methods now employed in the microbiology laboratory of Umgeni Water. She has been instrumental in encouraging staff to place greater emphasis on quality and customer care.

"Science and research has a crucial role to play in improving the health of especially the vulnerable members of the community, for example, those suffering from HIV/AIDS."

In 2004, Mthembu took up the position of security, safety, health, environment and quality coordinator at Umgeni Water. She continues to ensure that Umgeni Water provides quality water that conforms to regulatory standards as well as customer expectations while maintaining the interest of public health.

Coming from a background where she herself had to fetch unsafe water from a river for her household to drink, community water and health issues remains close to Mthembu's heart. "It has been an amazing journey of discovery in how micro-organisms in water affect the health of the community, for example, by causing diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea. Science and research has

a crucial role to play in improving the health of especially the vulnerable members of the community, for example, those suffering from HIV/AIDS."

As recipient of the award for research under 35 years, Mthembu also received R10 000 from the Water Research Commission.

Portia Mphephu in the Community Development Category

At only 20 years old, Mphephu is the youngest ever recipient of a Women in Water award. She participated in the stormwater project that ensured the 1,5 km channeling of the Duduza Spruit through Tswelapele Extensions 1 and 6. This was undertaken to link the lined water course through Winnie Mandela Park. The Ekurhuleni Municipality had to develop some of the areas in Tembisa because homes and belongings were being washed away during floods in the rainy season.

As a technical student, Mphephu made sure that she was involved in every decision that was taken to help this community. She was appointed occupational health and safety representative and made sure that everyone involved in the project complied with the safety regulations by ensuring that protective clothing was worn; children did not come close to construction areas; and chevron tape was used to mark dangerous places in open areas.

She also played a leadership role in the quality assurance of the project; including ensuring construction was being done in accordance to the drawings and specifications. In addition, she took on administration functions, ensuring that community participants were paid the correct wages every fortnight.



Lungile Mthembu (right) receives her award for the research category (under 35 years old) from Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry Buyelwa Sonjica. She also received a cash prize of R10 000 from the Water Research Commission.

Thelmah Mavimbela in the Education and Communication Category

Mavimbela is a Grade 5 educator at Mhwayi Primary School in a water-scarce area in Mpumalanga. During breaks and cleaning periods, learners had to walk long distances looking for water. Often they could find none.

Mavimbela solved the problem by procuring two rainwater-harvesting tanks donated by Eco-link. She also approached the Mbombela Municipality for a 10 000 l Jojo tank, which is used for storing clean water. A water truck replenishes the tank once a week.

Mavimbela also used money won in other competitions to purchase two plastic tanks. These six tanks are used to promote rainwater harvesting and water conservation. She also instituted a policy that each pupil brings 2 l of grey water to school on Mondays and Fridays. This is used for cleaning and watering the

flowers, trees and vegetables. Through her efforts she has not made a difference in the lives of her pupils, but has also contributed to community upliftment.

Sethe Mothibi-Thinane in the Management and Policy Category

As group corporate development manager for global forest products, Mothibi-Thinane is one of the few black women to enter the world of water management in the forestry environment. She has been appointed a member of the Rand Water Board, and has been nominated to serve on the Inkomati Governing Board, focusing on all water catchments in Mpumalanga. Her focus is mainly on sustainability and access to water by the villages in the rural areas.

She is also involved with CSIR in developing the strategy to assist the private and public sector to work together in finding solutions that have an impact on water and sanitation. 