

Lifeline for Struggling Water Treatment Plants



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The new national Technical Assistance Centre (TAC) promises to be a much-needed lifeline for small and medium-sized water and wastewater treatment plants struggling to comply with national quality regulations. Lani van Vuuren reports.

Smaller water and wastewater treatment plants are often situated in far-flung peri-urban or rural areas where technical and management capacity is hard to come by. It is no secret that many of these plants struggle with sustainable and efficient operation within national standards, which could have serious human and environmental health implications.

In an effort to relieve this situation the pilot TAC was launched last year as a joint initiative between the Water Research Commission (WRC), Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF), Water Institute of Southern Africa, Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) and the South African Local Government Association.

Centre facilitator and project leader Chris Swartz explains that a call centre and website are being established to provide pro-active and reactive assistance in the form of rapid and effective information, action plans and solutions to treatment plant owners, managers and personnel experiencing problems with their water and wastewater treatment plants. Information on technical, social, training and capacity building issues will be provided.

The TAC will be coordinated and managed by special coordinators, and

all communication to and from subscribers (individual and institutional) making use of the centre's services (whether by telephone, fax or e-mail) will be undertaken through the centre hub operated by the project leader. Enquiries regarding requirements for treatment plant optimisation or addressing specific problems will be logged and addressed by the centre personnel. Where additional consultation or site visits are required, the site will be visited by one of the centre's regional water professionals or contracted roving technicians.

It is important to note that the TAC will not be a regulatory enforcement agent, but will rather ensure effective flow to and from DWAF on regulatory matters, reports Swartz. The centre will also be accountable to a steering committee and DWAF in performing its functions. Specifically, the centre aims to identify the requirements of the owners of small water and wastewater treatment systems, and to advise and assist in the monitoring, evaluation, optimisation and upgrading of these systems.

The concept is being tested in two provinces, namely the Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Funding is being provided by the WRC, DWAF and the DBSA. During the 12-month piloting of the TAC, water and wastewater treatment

plants experiencing serious challenges with compliance and performance will be identified and then assisted on a priority basis. This will be undertaken pro-actively through discussions with authorities, consultants and knowledge of the project team or re-actively by enquiries from municipalities through the call centre, website or during introductory workshops that will be held in the two provinces.

"Providing assistance to these water and wastewater treatment plants will include, but not be limited to, visits to the plants by treatment specialists to perform assessments of the plants' condition, performance and compliance. These specialists will then draw up a list of upgrading needs, and facilitate the required upgrading and improvement actions," says Swartz. "Importantly, it will also include assessment of the present technical and management skills availability at the treatment plants and the relevant municipality's water care section, as well as identification of training needs. Facilitation of training and skills development as may be required will also be performed."

It is hoped that through these efforts non-compliance and operational difficulties at these small plants will soon be the exception rather than the norm. 