

SOL GETS GO-AHEAD

# Plan to save flamingos

## Organisations have their say

### Start Response

THE DEPARTMENT of Environment and Nature Conservation has given the go-ahead to the Sol Plaatje Municipality to dispose of the surplus effluent at Kamfers Dam to a farm near Langleig.

It was reported last week that the internationally renowned artist, local breeding island for lesser flamingos at Kamfers Dam was in danger of becoming totally submerged following the rising level of the dam due to the recent rains and inflow of sewage.

A few days later, after heavy rains in the city, webcam images of baby flamingos, drowning at the pen were viewed across the world and concern was expressed that dozens, if not hundreds of eggs and chicks, had been lost.

MEC for Environment and Nature Conservation, Sylvia Lucas, said yesterday at a press conference the department was "appalled" by reports of the threat to the flamingos.

"We have also further noted with concern that BirdLife SA and Wessels have constantly opposed every application by the Sol Plaatje Municipality for positive development without offering any alternatives."

Lucas said it had been alleged that the surplus effluent from Homestead treatment works was responsible for the rise in the water level of Kamfers Dam.

The rising water levels were caused by the rain and the subsequent flooding of the areas surrounding the dam, "Lucas said.

She added that the Sol Plaatje Municipality had been given permission as far back as December last year to continue with their proposed disposal of surplus effluent from the Homestead plant to a Langleig farm.

It is believed that the farm belongs to Piet Els.

"The organisations (BirdLife SA and Wessels) appeared against this decision. The department has rejected the appeal and given the Sol Plaatje Municipality the go-ahead to continue disposing of the surplus effluent to the alternative site as proposed."

Lucas added that if this could

have happened earlier, maybe the tragedy at Kamfers Dam could have been avoided.

"Firstly, we raise this issue as a matter of principle because as a department we are heartless and have abdicated our responsibility as custodians of all fauna and flora, including endangered species," she said.

"We remain a compliant department and custodians of nature that will do everything to ensure that we indeed act in the best interest of a sustainable environment that must be protected for future generations.

"Secondly, the department has been promoting the conservation of the flamingos over many years and the number of flamingos increased due to the conservation efforts of the department."

She pointed out that the construction of the breeding island was supported by the department in order to increase the number of permanent flamingos breeding in Kamfers Dam.

"Thirdly, the lesser flamingos have become a tourist attraction in the Kamfers area and we need to conserve and promote their existence through reasonable legislation and measures amongst the public. If we want to increase and maintain the number of tourists visiting the Province."

She encouraged the public to become aware of conservation matters that will affect them in the future and to take care of the environment. "We would love to encourage those opposing our efforts to address these issues and offer us alternatives. This will contravene the law as we are all genuine and want to ensure that conservation becomes everyone's business and not a means through which we settle scores with each other."

The following is a combined statement from Save the Flamingo Association, Wessels and BirdLife SA, issued in response to MEC SYLVIA LUCAS' statement regarding Kamfers Dam yesterday:

THIS SAVE the Flamingo Association (SFA) has since late 2008 been concerned about Kamfers Dam's rapidly rising water level, and this matter has been raised through a number of channels, including in letters to local, provincial and national government departments, media releases, and on our website ([www.save-the-flamingo.co.za](http://www.save-the-flamingo.co.za)).

The island height was based on recommendations made by Kweza V3 Engineers (in a Sol Plaatje Municipality-commissioned study) and in order to limit erosion of the island, Ekong Mining packed rocks around the island circumference at the height of the agreed on water level for the dam. Kamfers Dam's water level has, however, been rapidly rising, and since 2007 has been above the recommended maximum level.

The SFA noticed during October 2008 and prior to last week's heavy rains that the water level was rapidly rising and that the island was flooding and that the breeding event was in jeopardy. This northern end of the island was already under water prior to last week's two rainfall events.

More than two-thirds of the island is now under water and it is estimated that more than 7 000 of the 10 000 nests have been destroyed by the flooding. The SFA estimates that more than 1 000 lesser flamingo chicks drowned when the island flooded.

Ekong Mining has offered to repair the damage to the breeding island, but only once the dam's water level has stabilised and once water quality and quantity issues have been addressed by the Sol Plaatje Municipality.

BirdLife South Africa and Wessels have been accused of constantly

opposing every application made by Sol Plaatje for "positive development without offering any alternatives". This is, however, incorrect, as BirdLife South Africa has not opposed any Sol Plaatje Municipality development applications.

Furthermore, Wessels (Northern Cape) has only commented on one application, which was an application to dispose of surplus effluent from Homestead Treatment Works to Langleig Farm. Wessels appealed the environmental authorisation for this application more than nine months ago (on January 23 2008) based on valid objections to the environmental impact assessment process, which was inadequate (and because of concern for the impact of sewage water on sensitive pan ecosystems). Wessels was not opposed to the application itself, but did offer and request that alternatives are investigated, as is required by law.

Why did it take the Department of Environment and Nature Conservation so long to address the appeal (the department's response to Wessels was dated November 2 2009)?

If the appeal had been addressed within a reasonable period of a few months, the project could have started and flooding possibly prevented.

One of Wessels's concerns about using Langleig Pan as a disposal site for sewage effluent is that it could only hold a limited volume of water and this would thus only offer a very short-term solution to the problem.

The Langleig Basic Assessment Report was riddled with errors. For example, the report mentioned that a 200 metres-diameter pipe would be used to deliver water from Homestead to Langleig.

This was queried in Wessels's appeal (le whether it should perhaps be a 900 mm pipe), but the Department of Environmental and Nature Conservation's response was: "The applicant have (sic) not submitted any evidence to support their (sic) argument regarding

their (sic) view on the diameter of the pipe."

It should also be borne in mind that the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs (DWEA) has strict requirements for the disposal of sewage water, and the necessary licenses need to be obtained. It is highly unlikely that DWEA would issue the Sol Plaatje Municipality with a license to dispose of inferior quality water into a natural wetland (eg Langleig Pan).

It is also very important to note that the Homestead sewerage works is to date still not functioning properly. An investigation by the SFA on Saturday November 7 2009 showed that raw sewage effluent continues to flow into Kamfers Dam.

The facilities are being repaired, but the three primary settling tanks are not working, only three of the 12 separators are working, and only two of the three secondary settling tanks are working. There is currently a strong stream of raw sewage flowing directly into Kamfers Dam.

Buyeva Scopes, Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, last week in Parliament raised concerns about the pollution of our natural resources (wetlands) by malfunctioning sewage works.

The SFA has written to the minister and received replies, and she is aware of the Sol Plaatje Municipality's current inability to safely quash their Kimberley's sewage water and has apparently requested immediate action.

BirdLife South Africa, Wessels (Northern Cape) and Save the Flamingo Association remain committed to the conservation of South Africa's natural heritage and will not support short-term gains to influence the long-term protection of our country's environment.

The above three environmental organisations are very concerned about the loss of Kamfers Dam's lesser flamingo breeding island, one of only six breeding localities for the species in the world.

### BELOW: Its estimated find more

from 7 000 of the 10 000 nests on the Kamfers Dam flamingo breeding island have been destroyed by recent flooding. The flooding was compounded by the large quantities of effluent pumped into the dam, as seen here.

Picture: Supplied