

# Plan to avert SA's water crisis

## **PARTNERSHIP:** *Water Resources Group to help govt solve problems*

### **SASHA PLANTING**

THE South African government, which oversees one of the most water-stressed regions in the world, and the Water Resources Group (WRG), a public-private global network on water, have announced they have entered into a partnership to protect and preserve South Africa's water resources.

The WRG includes the likes of Coca-Cola and is supported by the International Finance Corporation and the World Economic Forum.

South Africa's water resources are badly managed: pipes leak, inefficient agricultural practices guzzle

water thirstily, acid mines are poisoning groundwater systems and municipalities lack the capacity to manage water resources. As a result, by 2030 the country's citizens and industries will demand more water than can be supplied.

The government has recognised this problem. "The balance between water demand and supply in South Africa is precarious right now," says Minister of Water Affairs & Environment Edna Molewa. Within the next 30 years, demand is expected to rise by 52%, while the supply of water is sharply declining. If trends of leakage from poorly maintained

municipal infrastructure and the loss of wetlands persist, competition for water resources will intensify, limiting economic growth and exacerbating social tensions.

Now it is working to remedy the problem, and the partnership is one of the steps taken.

"The WRG will assist the government in identifying and addressing critical water issues: water conservation, demand management, and better management of groundwater resources," says Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, chairman of WRG and chairman of multinational food producer, Nestlé.

The partnership will assist the Department of Water Affairs (DWA) in developing sector strategies for agriculture, industry and energy, such as increasing water-use efficiency, reducing leakage from distribution networks and diversifying the water mix by increasing the re-use of effluent and desalination.

The partnership will enable South Africa, and in turn the SADC region, to access best-practice projects and policies in water management from around the world.

The WRG initiative began some years ago. "In the past three decades no progress has been made with regard to the more efficient consumption and usage of water. On the contrary, the world now uses more water to produce one unit of food or one unit of energy than it has in the past," says Brabeck-Letmathe.

And consumption is showing no sign of abating. The demand for food and energy is growing as the global middle-class grows. While people may consume a litre or two of water per day, it is a different matter when it comes to the food they eat – and the choices they make in that regard – because the production of food is water-dependent.

"A vegetarian would, in effect, consume 2 500 litres a day while a meat eater consumes 6 000 litres a day," says Brabeck-Letmathe.

The WRG has already identified areas where efficiencies can be gained. The next step for South Africa is to create a public-private leadership group to lead this partnership. It will be chaired by the DG of Water and Environmental Affairs and will include stakeholders from industry, other government departments (such as Minerals & Energy), and the WWF.

Other partners of the WRG are Mexico, Jordan and the state of Karnataka in India.