

# Agribusinesses must prepare for water shortages

Water has a vital role to play in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). From detecting the presence of COVID-19 in sewerage systems, to maintaining basic hygiene standards, ensuring an adequate water supply has never been more important.

On 15 April 2020, the Minister of the Department of Human Settlements, Water and Sanitation, Lindiwe Sisulu, published directions in terms of the Disaster Management Act 2002 to implement the emergency procurement of water supply and sanitation services, and deploy these to identified areas that lack water for basic hygiene purposes to combat the spread of COVID-19.

## COMMAND CENTRE

The National Disaster Water Command Centre (NDWCC), has been established to achieve these objectives and will be staffed by representatives from various water boards, as well as officials from the department and municipalities. The NDWCC is to be coordinated by the chief executive of Rand Water and supervised by the Minister and the Rand Water Board. The Rand Water Board is also responsible

for various strategic areas and deliverables, and is tasked with coordinating the procurement of water and sanitation equipment directly from manufacturers and suppliers.

The directions also place certain obligations on municipalities. These include identifying the appropriate public spaces for the placement of water tanks, water tankers, communal stand pipes, ablution blocks and toilets for public use. Municipalities must also distribute water and sanitation packs from the NDWCC, consisting of hand soap, sanitisers, rubber gloves and masks, while strictly complying with social distancing requirements.

Water suppliers, such as irrigation boards, water user associations and catchment management agencies must supply water when directed to do so by the NDWCC. The department may also require that any services, property or assets of these water suppliers be made available to the department upon request. However, the department must first use its own resources and assets for water distribution, save in circumstances where a private service is governed by

a contract. Water suppliers, as well as the NDWCC, must keep records of the quantities and costing of water supplied, including reimbursement invoices.

The NDWCC must also arrange and administer a monitoring system to track emergency water and sanitation procurement and distribution processes.

## WATER SUPPLIERS MUST PROVIDE WATER WHEN DIRECTED TO DO SO

### AGRIBUSINESSES

Suppliers typically supply water to agribusinesses, and depending on the volumes of water required by the NDWCC, agribusinesses may have their allocations reduced in water-scarce areas and thus find it necessary to supplement their water supply from alternative water resources, such as groundwater. Industrial water-use consumption is likely to be low at present given the scaling back of economic activity during the lockdown. However, as industrial activity eases back to full capacity, strain may be

placed on supply in water-scarce areas. Agribusinesses should thus identify alternative water supplies and apply for water-use licences to supplement their supply from alternative water sources. The department has indicated that water-use licences will be granted in 70 days for the agriculture sector as of 1 April, although legislation giving effect to this shift from the statutory 300 days has yet to be published.

It is unclear just how much water suppliers will be required to provide and what, if any, knock-on effects this may have on the water supply for agribusinesses. Either way, given the levels of water scarcity in South Africa, agribusinesses would be well advised to have already commenced with the adoption of water efficiency measures to reduce their water-use footprint and to have alternative water-use mitigation strategies in place for times of acute shortages.

Companies with employees in these identified areas should encourage their employees to utilise the hygiene services provided by the NDWCC as part of their COVID-19 employee awareness campaigns. James Brand, ENSafrica.