

Media Statement



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Rietvlei

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Media Statement: Misleading Rietvlei Report-Drink the Water!

I refer to the media Report that Appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* on 11 May 2007. I must stress that the article does not offer a balanced account of the problem.

Firstly, the report suggests that I “refused to release the full report”. I issued the journalist with a media statement and I also telephoned her personally, stating that the report will be made available to her as soon as it was published. My media statement dated 26 April reads “Please be informed that the project mentioned above has not been finalised yet. Research projects such as this one is a collaborative effort and various role-players need to network, compare findings and verify results in order to publish and disseminate findings and recommendations that are factually correct. Publishing a half-baked product will be irresponsible and will run contrary to the WRC mission of being South Africa’s water knowledge hub.”

The newspaper report seems intended to create a panic situation and runs contrary to the goals of the WRC research report. The many references to “carcinogenic risks”; “endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs)”; “reproductive health”; “general health” and “gonadal malformations” is not counter-balanced with the argument that “the water is being treated” and that “treated water is safe to use”. Instead they are treated as parallel issues, which is misleading in itself. The final speculation that “ ‘ unacceptable health risks ‘ can be expected if untreated water is used for domestic purposes.” In this regard, especially, the WRC finds the headline to be not only incongruous, but also grossly sensational.

The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) discourages drinking raw water from rivers or dams without prior treatment. The microbial hazard far outweighs the EDC hazard if such a practice occurs. Part of proper treatment includes optimization of drinking water treatment and the use, where necessary, of activated carbon or other

suitable adsorbents to remove pesticides from water. The flocculation step also removes a large portion of any pesticides present. It is also important to mention that the audit sampling that was done in March is not a once off audit. DWAF does monthly water quality monitoring in Rietvlei Dam, both upstream and down stream and also Rietvlei River and Rietvlei Spruit to check if there are unacceptable impacts that warrant immediate intervention and in March, nothing was detected. The WRC conducts research to develop a tool to enable Government to monitor and audit water quality. We study the Dam as an experimental site; not to study the Dam for quality control.

In an era of globalization, South Africa should not be precluded from benchmarking EDC contamination on a global scale since the problem is NOT peculiar to South Africa. The WRC is also collaborating with the Global Water Research Coalition (GWRC) in a suite of EDC-related research. The newspaper report is myopic since it fails to address EDCs as being a global problem- a problem where solutions are made available and shared on a plethora of international platforms.

As pointed out in the WRC report summary, the finding of biologically significant levels of EDC's is a worldwide phenomenon and even occurs in Antarctica where EDCs have never been used. Much research to date indicates that the major exposure to EDCs worldwide is in food consumed and not in the water phase. Pesticides/EDCs are fat-soluble and tend in most cases to adhere to sediment particles and are uncommonly found in the water phase.

The fact that the audit water samples did not show a single organo-chlorine pesticide in the water tested implies that if they are indeed present, it is either in miniscule insignificant quantities or bound to the sediment.

The research to date indicates that the animals in the reserve are getting exposed to EDC's, but the route is not clear. It is important to note that this is a new field of research globally and that most research at this stage concentrates on methodology development to allow reliable methods for detection of either the chemicals or their activities. The extent of both environmental and human health is still not fully understood. The same is true regarding the routes of exposure.

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