

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

NO SUCH THING AS LEVEL PLAYING FIELDS FOR AGRICULTURE: CAPE TOWN SURRENDERS DAY ZERO PREDICTIONS

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The prevailing drought in the Western Cape continues unabated.

Amidst an unfolding crisis, the City of Cape Town decides to surrender its Day Zero predictions, leaving the agricultural sector feeling isolated and betrayed.



Farming in South Africa is generally tough, but it has never been harder or riskier to be in the agricultural business than it is today. Amidst the ongoing drought in the Western Cape, the ruling party in the province does away with its Day Zero predictions for the City of Cape Town, leaving the agricultural community seething.

Drought

Farmers in the south-western part of the country are currently experiencing one the greatest droughts in history, the consequences which, by itself, will be nearly devastating in the Western Cape as well as large

parts of the Northern Cape and Eastern Cape. The impacts of the current drought will directly be felt throughout South Africa in the form of, amongst other things, food price inflation with respect to certain commodities, including fruit, vegetables, wheat and red meat. Indirectly, the effects of the loss of foreign revenue from exports and job-losses will be felt both regionally and throughout the country.

Even if the Western Cape is blessed with normal rainfall during the coming winter months, the effects of the current drought are anticipated to carry through well into the next couple of years. The primary agricultural sector will require enormous capital investment in replacing uprooted or destroyed orchards and vineyards, rebuilding herds of livestock and the rehabilitation of both cultivated and grazing fields. The recovery of the regional agricultural sector may take years, even under best forecast scenarios.

On 13 February 2018, the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) declared the ongoing drought in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape Provinces a National Disaster. The Provincial Government in the Western Cape as well as Agri SA had been calling for such a declaration since 2016. The declaration of a National Disaster in terms of the National Disaster Management Act of 2002 (DMA) is a very serious matter and falls just short of a declaration of a State of Emergency in terms of section 37 of the Constitution. It entails that the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Dr Zweli Mkhize's may, in consultation with other Cabinet Ministers (including the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries), make regulations and authorise the issuing of directions concerning, amongst other things-

- the release of any available resources of the national government;
- steps to alleviate, contain and minimise the effects of the disaster;
- steps that may be necessary to prevent an escalation of the disaster; and
- the facilitation of response and post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation.

The National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC), which advises the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, has brought together a group of stakeholders, including Agri SA, to deal with the devastating effects which the drought has had on the agricultural sector and to come up with a smart drought disaster management plan. This process is currently underway and will deal with the current and future effects of the drought as they unfold.

The current drought in the Western Cape will only be regarded as having been broken should the province's water supply system recover to above 85%, at which time the severe water restrictions currently which are currently in place may be lifted. (This position may be revisited in November 2018). Also, in terms of the current national water restrictions for the Breede-Gouritz en Berg-Olifants Catchment Management Areas, the regional Head of the Department of Water and Sanitation has been directed not to release any water from the system dams where agricultural bulk water user associations, irrigation boards or individual water users have depleted their curtailed seasonal bulk volumes. The province's agricultural sector agreed to abide by these measures and to assist government as much as possible.

Different playing fields

Against this backdrop, it appears curious that the leader of the governing Democratic Alliance party in the Western Cape, Mr Mmusi Maimane, on 7 March announced that the predicted Day Zero scenario for the City of Cape Town may be avoided during the current year.

The Day Zero scenario was used as a planning and communications tool by the City of Cape Town as an indication as to when the City's water supply was expected to fail because of the ongoing drought plaguing the City. While it may have focused some Capetonians' attention on the severity of the prevailing drought, this Doomsday prediction had previously been questioned by various water-sector role players, including the agricultural sector.

In many cases farmers have since 12 January 2018 had to make do with almost none of their allocated water because of nationally-imposed and strictly-enforced water restrictions. This has lead of enormous losses and hardship for the agricultural community, including job losses for seasonal farm labourers. Farmers did, however, feel that they were doing all they could to assist in averting the City's impending Day Zero catastrophe. In certain cases, farmers even offered to release some of their remaining water to the City. They are now feeling let down and betrayed by government.

Nothing much has changed in the City. The prevailing drought continues unabated. None of the City's augmentation schemes are up and running yet. The City's consumption target of 450 Ml/day has never been met. There is no guarantee of the coming winter season's rainfall being sufficient to break the drought.



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The City's Day Zero predictions were clearly based on very rough estimations. It may also inadvertently have precipitated its own unforeseen water management crisis. Panicked persons (who could afford to do so) began buying and stockpiling both raw and treated water in anticipation of Day Zero coming about. This disruption of normal consumption patterns created enormous difficulties for City water planners as well as the Department of Water and Sanitation.

Although the City previously acknowledged that its estimations of its water supply were revised because of agriculture's reduced consumption, it appears to have cried wolf too soon and now needs to backtrack on its expedient Day Zero predictions.

It is no small thing to watch a harvest wither and die due to drought. At least to some degree it felt as if farmers and city-dwellers were on the same side in trying to overcome this devastating drought. Now they are not so certain...

Farmers certainly feel isolated and betrayed by the City's handling of the current drought situation.

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