

Project losing war on alien plants

Budget spending is not prioritised: report

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THE WORKING for Water programme is the biggest conservation programme in Africa and creates a huge number of jobs – but it's not keeping the spread of water-guzzling invasive alien plants throughout South Africa in check.

Also, the spending of its substantial budget is not being properly prioritised, and more funds should be allocated to biological control methods for alien species – currently just 3 percent of its budget – to achieve greater returns of “ecosystem services” like clean water and maintaining biodiversity, rather than concentrating on job creation.

These are some of the key findings of an assessment of the innovative programme that was launched in 1995.

The assessment, recently published in an academic journal, was presented to the Fynbos Forum conference in Cape St Francis last week by one of the authors, Dr Brian van Wilgen of the CSIR.

Van Wilgen said Working for Water was “a really good idea” and had made “enormous progress” – “But we have to learn from our mistakes and get better,” he added.

The authors of the assessment argued that the programme's funding should be spent in areas deemed a priority for removing aliens, even if this meant other areas currently being cleared would lose their funding and hence jobs. Natural resources like water were required to drive South Africa's economy, Van Wilgen said.

“Even without creating one single job, (clearing invasive alien species) is worth doing. I'm a little worried that people are losing the original motivation for the programme.”

In response, national programme leader Dr Guy Preston said Working for Water was arguably the most significant, important and successful conservation programme in South Africa's history, and had spawned a suite of other successful environmen-

tal programmes like Working on Fire and Working for Wetlands.

“(But) it is riddled with challenges that we have to address,” he acknowledged. The issue of job creation was important, and Working for Water had been the prime mover behind the government's Expanded Public Works, Preston argued.

“We started this suite of programmes and we desperately need to continue to get those benefits from the work that we do. There will always be a compromise between jobs and the outcomes.”

The programme had started with just R25 million in 1995 and now had a massive R4 billion budget over three years, but even this was too little to achieve all the required clearing, Preston said.

“(But) I really do think we are in the process of turning a corner with the changes that we've made. We are addressing all the issues raised and I think we will see quite a different return on investment from what we do.”

Preston pointed out that the current return on the investment in terms of the value of the water saved had been independently estimated at an “extraordinary” R453bn.

He said problems for the programme had included a lack of appropriately worded laws and a lack of enforcement of existing regulations.

“We have been fighting with our hands behind our back (but) I think we are going to see a dramatic change in this,” he predicted.

Also, the programme – the biggest of its kind in Africa – had been “enormously under-staffed, but had now appointed a chief director and eight directors and a “whole host” of other positions.

Also, 27 posts had been created to monitor and investigate compliance with biosafety regulations, although the Green Scorpions would do actual enforcement.

“We're very confident and very determined that we're going to make the law work for us,” Preston said.