

Press Release: Issued George Municipality and Eden District Municipality, 17 April 2018
Immediate Release

Joint Press Release George Municipality and Eden District Municipality regarding river quality monitoring and related matters by George Municipality: Director Civil Engineering Services, Reggie Wesso and Eden District Municipality: Executive Manager, Clive Africa

Relevant officials in the George Municipality and Eden District Municipality have recently met to discuss sporadic complaints and concerns pertaining to the quality of rivers in the George Municipal Area and make the following statement in this regard.

The George Municipality has a legal obligation to monitor river quality up and down stream of the wastewater treatment plants where effluent is discharged into the river. This is done in accordance with the License or General Authorisation applicable for the wastewater plant issued by the Department of Water and Sanitation. While it is not a legal requirement, river samples are also taken up and down stream of pump stations as a management tool to monitor possible pollution from infrastructure.

The roles and responsibilities of the Eden District Municipal Health Services in this regard are:

1. Monitoring water quality and availability, including mapping of water sources.
2. Enforcement of laws and related water quality monitoring.
3. Ensuring water safety in respect of its quality (microbial and chemical) and accessibility to an adequate quantity for domestic use as well as in respect of the quality of water for recreational, industrial and food production purposes, and for any other human and animal use.
4. Ensuring water supplies are readily accessible to communities and that the planning, design, management and health surveillance of community water supplies are readily accessible to communities.
5. Ensuring monitoring and effective waste water treatment and water pollution control, including the collection, treatment and disposal of sewage water and other water borne waste and control of quality of surface water (including the sea) and ground water.
6. Advocacy on proper and safe water and waste water usage.
7. Water sampling and testing on the field or in a laboratory.

There are 110 sewage pump stations in the greater George Municipal Area, some of which are situated near rivers and streams. As with any man-made infrastructure, systems can fail and may cause pollution. The George Municipality has identified the most likely places in rivers below pump stations where pollution may occur and samples are taken and tested daily at the municipal laboratory as part of standard operating procedures. When a test sample indicates unacceptable levels of contamination, whether the source is sewage or some other contaminant, the area is treated accordingly as per guidelines of the Department of Water and Sanitation as prescribed in the General Authorisation or License requirement.

Results of the municipality's fixed sampling programme is circulated to Eden DM and is available to the provincial and national departments on request. The municipality also has a waste water risk abatement plan, which is submitted to the Department of Water Affairs as required.

In addition, the civil engineering department responds to reports of sewage spills from the public. The municipality welcomes, in fact encourages, the public to help look out for sewage spills everywhere, near rivers or not, as alert and attentive residents are a valuable ally in being our eyes

and ears – especially in remote areas where hikers and adventure sportsmen may come upon pollution sources that municipal staff may not readily encounter.

Treated effluent from the Waste Water Treatment Works is also flushed into rivers, but have been elaborately treated, complies to quality standards and is not harmful to humans and animals.

The George Municipality acknowledges that several challenges contribute to the risk of river contamination including aging infrastructure, above-average population growth and related new infrastructure demand, and a significantly understaffed Civil Engineering Services department combined with major legislative, procedural and budgetary constraints. That being said, the municipality is adamant that everything that can be done is being done and that it is making a concerted effort to address contributory factors on several levels.

The George Municipality's Water Services Development Plan is a detailed long-term plan in which the systematic upgrade and expansion of water and sewerage infrastructure is set out and prioritised based on age of infrastructure, amount of people being serviced per infrastructure, current and future bulk needs and funds available. The plan is updated regularly to address changing circumstances. Due to challenges as mentioned above, it is unlikely that the municipality can fulfil its water and sewage infrastructure mandate without outside financial assistance from government grants and legitimate environmental and other initiatives.

Eden DM acknowledges the constraints under which the George Municipality operates and, while it wishes more ideal circumstances with lesser spills and better infrastructure, it takes note that the matter is receiving attention.

George Municipality is investigating ways in which especially the significant financial need for the upgrading of bulk infrastructure can be addressed, which in turn would reduce pollution and ultimately contribute to a better and healthier environment.

The municipalities reiterate that river water is not drinking water, and like any open water source, rivers are susceptible to many natural contaminants including faeces from different species of wildlife and homeless people living in the bushes on the banks of the rivers. We are, however, fortunate that our river systems are supported by healthy wetlands and other natural agents, which play a major role in naturally filtering contaminants long before it lands in water collection points such as the Garden Route Dam.

It should also be noted that the drinking water in your taps is not water directly from the river, and possible river contamination is not directly equal to the quality of the water in the taps.

In regards to 'independent sampling':

George and Eden District Municipalities from time to time receive sampling results from members of the public, which they claim prove rivers remain contaminated. While the municipalities do not dispute that the places may very well have been temporarily polluted, they cannot legally accept results of random samples. There are many factors that can affect the results of a testing sample such as the type of sample (bacteriological or chemical); the cleanliness of the sampling container; the sampling site; sampling procedure; laboratory analysis procedure; the laboratory accreditation; the time from sampling to testing; testing conditions and more. Also, from the time that a sample has been taken by a private individual to the time he would receive the results, it is likely that the conditions at the site where sampling was made would have changed – particularly if it was reported to the correct authorities and treated, but also due to weather conditions such as temperature, natural change in river flow after rain etc.)

In regards to the Kat River:

George and Eden District Municipalities from time to time receive complaints from residents living along the Mitchell and Kat Rivers, alleging that the municipalities are not addressing the issues of river quality there.

The George Municipality confirms the upgrade of infrastructure above the relevant section is included in the pipe replacement plan, but that it is regarded a lower priority compared to infrastructure near other river systems in the municipal area – not only because the population density living near the river here is relatively low compared to other riverside residential areas, but also because the wetland systems in the flow of this river and the rivers it feeds into are healthy and relatively efficient in breaking down pollutants.

The George and Eden District Municipalities are, however, aware of the concern and appreciate the vigilant community living along the river that alert us to signs of possible pollution. The George Municipality commits to respond to complaints in this section as soon as we are able and the Eden DM confirms that they are mindful of this area as this forms part of its overall monitoring programme.