Speech by Anton Bredell
Minister of Local Government Environmental Affairs and Development Planning
Garden Route Environmental Forum
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Good Morning,

It is my pleasure to be here today.

The Garden Route is one of our province’s and indeed our country’s crown jewels. It attracts millions of visitors and sees many people moving to the region annually in search of the better life the region can offer. An area like George is one of the biggest and fastest growing areas in the Western Cape. Outside Cape Town, George is the biggest city in the Province. A lot of effort has been put in over the years to improve and grow the region.

These efforts continue. The huge growth in the area coupled with the ongoing climate change disaster has also seen added challenges arise, wildfires. In 2017 we had an estimated 17000 wildfires in the Western Cape. Many of those were here in the Garden Route, including the devastating wildfire in Knysna which saw more than ten thousand (10 000) people being evacuated from that town in the middle of the night with the town fighting fires on all sides.

Here in the Mossel Bay area we have seen the huge devastation wildfires can cause. The Western Cape Government has, over the past decade been building our resources to combat these types of disasters and if not for the capacity building, we would certainly have seen much greater damage and devastation over the years.

In addition, drought has caused havoc and is a major cause of concern for the years ahead. Since 1960, the amount of available fresh water globally per capita has declined by more than half. This means that more than 40% of the world’s population is facing water stress and indeed by 2030, demand for fresh water is expected to exceed supply by an estimated 40%. We are currently combating ongoing drought in the Karoo and the Northern Parts of the West Coast in this province of ours. In Mossel Bay the town ran into serious trouble in 2011 and a desalination plant was built. Nationally the situation is as serious if not more so.

The bottom line is we must start thinking differently and we need to plan much better and make better decisions. Many of these decisions relate to the environment and how we manage our sensitive ecological areas. We must start being more proactive. I am afraid South Africa is not a very pro-active country. We keep playing catch up instead of trying to get ahead of our challenges and problems. There are
exceptions though and I believe the work done by my department’s officials represent some of those exceptions.

My Department and CapeNature have developed a Biodiversity Spatial Plan and its companion guidebook which represents the state-of-the-art planning for ecological sustainability to be used in planning and decision-making within the Province. Further we have been systematically putting in place coastal management lines and estuarine management plans in partnership with Local and National authorities in the area. In order that we get on to the front foot we need to integrate these plans within our local planning frameworks and Land Use Management Systems and Schemes.

We are all going to face very difficult decisions in the future and often the correct decision may not be the popular one or the one we want. We need to understand we are building a world for future generations now. That is a big part of our responsibility and we cannot mess it up.

**Program Director**

I want to for a moment talk about alien and invasive species.

More must be done to tackle this harmful problem, but the reality is it will require a team effort. As government we cannot go it alone. Against this background it is therefore essential to emphasize the duties of all land owners in terms of the Alien and Invasive Species Regulations which came into effect on 01 October 2014. Duties which includes better managing the land they own or manage in order to ensure that the future risk for wildfires is limited.

My Department is currently developing the Western Cape Ecological Infrastructure Investment Framework with the assistance of the CSIR. This framework is aimed at prioritizing investment into ecological infrastructure, such as our Strategic Water Source Areas, to simultaneously address the risks of climate change, water security and fire, while providing work opportunities in related value-added industries.

At a recent engagement with trade mission from the Dutch Government, our counterparts have indicated that there is a massive demand for biomass in the Netherlands which is stated to be 3.5 million tons per annum. Imagine how this demand can create the economic driver to address the threats of invading woody aliens! We will continue to “centre stage” this biomass export potential within our developing Provincial Strategic Plan as a key opportunity for work creation.

We will be focusing our efforts on the Keerbooms/Karatara catchments in the coming financial year to enable a financial model for sustainable water yields through catchment management. This project has already come a long way with Bitou and Knysna municipalities and land owners being key partners. The Ecological Infrastructure Investment Framework will be developed as a transversal programme
within the Provincial Government, which will engage all partners. We ask that you take hands with us to commit to high ambition targets that we drive to achievement.

Program Director
You are undoubtedly aware of highly sensitive and vulnerable sites within the Garden Route and large parts of it is considered to be critical biodiversity areas. My department has taken a firm stance on this and I want to highlight it here again that in our view, such areas must be utilized in a manner that ensures the long-term integrity of such environmental assets.

For the future of the Garden Route and all its communities, it is our view as the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs, that such key areas must be protected, and we will work in close collaboration with all the stakeholders to achieve this. We hope that we can all come together on this issue. The problem with environmental assets is that once they are developed or polluted or damaged in some or other way, it is often impossible or very difficult and costly to restore them to their original state. In the disposal of all such lands and assets in the Garden Route, authorities must have a view to their value for inclusion into the protected area network and how such assets can contribute to the ecotourism offerings within the area.

As government we are increasingly caught in a catch 22 situation where we must make difficult decisions on issues like land use. The competing demands for land and limited budgets make decision-making very difficult. We must start realizing that ecological sites are vital to the long-term sustainability of entire regions and there should be no compromise. It is for this reason that my Department is driving the implementation of Coastal Management Lines in partnership with all the authorities in Province, including in the Garden Route. Changes on our coastline area are already happening. The best adaptation strategy is avoidance of the physical impacts of climate change.

Our planning and decision-making simply must take the opportunities now to be informed by the best available science on these physical risks posed by climate change. Furthermore, this is the only rational response to ensuring we are left with the coast we want rather than one littered with derelict infrastructure that no one can afford to remove, let alone protect. Partners in the room, we have difficult choices ahead, one is which will be our legacy as leaders. What legacy do we want to leave? It is in our hands.

Program Director
Our country faces many challenges, the economy, unemployment, poverty and inequality to mention a few and the solutions are difficult, but I do believe one way we can move ahead is by working better together. We need to pool resources and combine talents and we need to all get onboard the same trains and ensure we go in the same direction. We have no shortage of creativity and we are blessed with
incredible natural resources which will sustain us and provide the opportunities for growth, if we work together in ensuring their sustainability and optimal management. In this region the biodiversity economy and coastal/blue economies must take centre stage. There can be no doubt that the challenges we face are increasing every year. We must think more radically, and we must work better together if we wish to make a real difference.

I hope that this will come to fruition here in the Garden Route too.

I thank you.