

# Government relaxes water allocation restrictions for EC farmers

To curb economic difficulties, the government has relaxed its stringent water quotas imposed on the Gamtoos River Valley farmers reliant on Kouga Dam, the region's biggest water source. The easing of restrictions - from 40% of farmers' allocated annual drawings to 85% for the new water year which starts in July - comes on the back of discussions between the Department of Water and Sanitation, Kouga Dam custodians the Gamtoos Irrigation Board (GIB) and the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality in Port Elizabeth on Tuesday, 25 June 2019.



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The move comes as the Kouga Dam's water level remains steady at about 45%, currently sitting at 44.5% capacity.

The restrictions, introduced in 2017 when the dam level sank critically low, saw farmers able to draw just 20% of their annual water allocations in mid-2018 – a move which signalled cutbacks in citrus and cash crop production in a valley renowned locally and internationally for its quality produce. This, in turn, saw job cuts for seasonal and permanent workers in the region.

GIB CEO Rienette Colesky described the easing of restrictions as "good news for farmers".

"The past two years of severe restrictions put an exceptional strain on farmers in the region," she said. "If [severe restrictions] carried on for a third year, the consequences would have been dire."

## Restriction implications

According to information from GIB stakeholders, the strain of restrictions had manifested in a 20.8% reduction in employment of fulltime and seasonal labourers, translating into a loss of R51.4m to lower-income families in lost wages over the past year, directly and indirectly affecting 6,640 individuals, said Colesky.

Colesky said that the last maize crop from the valley was delivered in 2016. Without restrictions, about 17,000 tonnes of maize is produced in the valley annually. In the absence of restrictions, major retailers purchased fresh produce from farms in the Loerie, Hankey and Patensie areas to the tune of R107m annually, she said.

"During the past two years, the ability of these vegetable farmers to deliver on the contracts signed with retailers was put in jeopardy due to the drought. Dairy farmers had to move their livestock to greener pastures outside the valley."

GIB chairman and citrus farmer in the valley, Tertius Meyer, welcomed the easing of restrictions which would give "breathing room" to farmers. "We are still facing a drought, if you look at the below-average rainfall we've received over the past 12 months. So, the easing of restrictions makes a significant difference."

"At the end of the day it's still not the full 100% allocation, but it's something. More water-intensive vegetable crops will probably start being planted again, which in turn will create more employment."

Fellow board member and citrus farmer, Khaya Katoo, said the relaxed restrictions would see him plant more saplings. The citrus harvested in years to come would be predominantly for export to markets like Europe, the Middle East, China and the US, he said.

The trees would be planted in lands which until now had stood empty after being used for water-intensive vegetable crops – crops which were axed when harsh water restrictions were introduced in 2017. "This means we can start employing again, starting with permanent workers for planting and, down the line, more seasonal workers for harvesting," concluded Katoo.

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