

Green spaces get a reprieve from mining

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But prospecting licence moratorium won't spare sensitive areas, environmentalists fear

Mining Minister Susan Shabangu's announcement of a six-month moratorium on new applications for mineral prospecting licences will not help sensitive environmental areas threatened by already pending mining applications, green activists warned this week.

But conservation circles were generally delighted by the moratorium and other reforms in the permit process announced by her. The minister said the moratorium would apply to new applications made from September 1.

She cited the chaos and uncertainty caused by mining legislation and a flood of mining licences since 2004 as the principal reasons for the moratorium. She said that possible corruption and irregularities involving the issuing of mining licences would also be investigated. In the past six years her department had received more than 25 600 licence applications.

But environmentalists were still concerned about pending applications, such as the recent licence application by the state mining company, African Exploration and Mining Finance Corporation (AEMFC), to prospect for coal in the Nylsvley floodplain, a Ramsar wetland in Limpopo.

Carolyn Ah Shene-Verdoorn, the policy and advocacy manager of BirdLife South Africa, warned that Shabangu's announcement "doesn't solve the problem of already pending applications in sensitive areas such as Nylsvley".

AEMFC was in the news earlier this year when it applied for a licence to prospect in the Western Cape's winelands region, but it withdrew its application after pressure from landowners and environmental groups.

Shene-Verdoorn said AEFMC was moving into other environmentally sensitive areas where it "is ludicrous that the department is even entertaining applications". Besides Nylsvley, they include Chrissiesmeer in Mpumalanga and important wetlands in the North West.

She said AEFMC was homing in on areas without apparent concern for the impact on the environment and South Africa's water security.

The state mining company's Nylsvley application, referred to as the Grootvalley Prospecting Application, covers the Nyl River Floodplain Important Bird Area. It targets an area outside the Nylsvley Nature Reserve but includes the Nyl River floodplain and would undoubtedly affect the site, Birdlife SA said.

The reserve was declared a Ramsar site in 1997 and is home to more than half the bird species found in South Africa. During high rainfall years it can host up to 80 000 birds. Shene-Verdoorn said it had become a very important breeding area for the critically endangered Eurasian bittern.

The Chrissiesmeer area, with more than 320 lakes and pans on mainly private land, is also a haven for birds, including the lesser flamingo, greater flamingo, crowned crane and chestnut-banded plover, all classified as vulnerable or near-threatened.

AEMFC's application for North West includes the Kgomo-Kgomo floodplain near Brits, home to thousands of waterbirds and a habitat for such species as the black-winged pratincole, greater painted snipe, black stork, African marsh harrier and pallid harrier.

Mark Anderson, executive director of BirdLife South Africa, said environmentalists were not opposed to all mining, only to mining activity in environmentally sensitive areas.

Shabangu said this week that no mining should be allowed in wetlands, rivers or national parks. Her department, with the Department of Environmental Affairs, would be mapping areas where mining activities would be prohibited.

In July, after a meeting between Shabangu and Buyelwa Sonjica, the environment minister, it was announced that a special government task team would investigate mining in sensitive localities. This followed the granting of a string of controversial mining and prospecting licences in such areas.

The mining department will also audit all mining licences and prospecting licences and make them accessible to the public online.

Shabangu announced that in future regional offices would not be allowed to make permit decisions without the assistance of senior personnel deployed from the national office.

Stakeholders would be able to report alleged corruption in the handling of mining licences directly to the department's headquarters.

Sizwe Madondo, AEFMC's chief executive, did not respond to the *Mail & Guardian's* requests for comment.

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