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Winelands Action Group confirms withdrawal of prospecting rights applications – a victory for social justice.

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STOP Mining our Winelands! Winelands Action Group confirms withdrawal of prospecting rights applications – a victory for social justice.

Friday 19th March 2010

Following weeks of overwhelming pressure from producer groups such as the various Farmworker Forums, the Cape Winemakers Guild (CWG), Wines of South Africa (WOSA), Stellenbosch and Durbanville Wine Routes, conservation groups such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and WWF's Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI), the Bottelary Conservancy, the Greater Cape Town Civic Alliance, influential international wine writers, heritage groups from all over the country as well as the public at large in South Africa and around the world, the Department of Mineral Resources today confirmed in writing that state-owned African Exploration Mining and Finance Company (AEMFC) had officially withdrawn their Cape Town and Stellenbosch prospecting rights applications in the Western Cape.

Hailing the news as "a victory for social justice and democratic rights" the Winelands Action Group had been cautiously optimistic on hearing reports a week and a half ago that the Director General of the Department of Mineral Resources, Adv Sandile Nogxina had announced that the applications would be withdrawn, but then had to continue with legal and public protest action when subsequent communication with AEMFC staff as well as their consultants GCS revealed that despite the assurances given in a press release issued on behalf of the Chairman of AEMFC, the state company and their consultants were still going ahead with the application process. Staff of the Regional DME office in Cape Town also confirmed that the applications were going ahead and that 'the statement issued was incorrect'.

Winelands Action Group aligns with other NGO's

An untenable situation developed where either the employees and consultants of AEMFC had deliberately gone against the chairman's public statements, or else there had been a deliberate attempt by AEMFC to distract both the media and the public at large by informing them of the application withdrawal, but then still continuing with the process hoping there would be no comments received by the objectors to the plans. The Cape Town and Stellenbosch communities were outraged at the about-turn by state mining company African Exploration Mining and Finance Company (AEMFC) regarding the withdrawal of prospecting rights in the Cape winelands and vowed to fight on, uniting to form the 'Winelands Action Group' and aligning themselves with WWF, The Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), the Verlorenvlei Coalition and the Mapungubwe Action Group amongst many others, calling on all affected parties country-wide to join forces to oppose the indiscriminate issuing of prospecting and mining licenses in economically, ecologically and environmentally sensitive areas of South Africa.

Call for a National Forum on Mining Policy

The prospecting rights applications in the Cape winelands have highlighted the fact that applications need to be tackled at a national policy level, rather than remaining individually case-specific. The Winelands Action Group therefore calls on all the NGO's and interested local and international groups affected by the indiscriminate issuing of prospecting and mining rights to join together in calling for a National Forum on South African Mining Policy where policy is discussed at a constitutional level and involving the highest courts if necessary.

Background

State-owned and funded by the Central Energy Fund, AEMFC had applied for prospecting rights for tin, zinc, lead, lithium, copper, manganese and silver on the farms Annex Langverwacht 245 (which included Saxenburg, Jordan, Langverwacht and Zevenwacht Estates), Haasendal 222 and the remaining extent of Rosendal 249. Another application included prospecting rights over Highlands, Hooggelegen and David Graaf's farm De Grendel in the Tygerberg/Durbanville area. The Department of Mineral Resources had provisionally accepted these prospecting rights. AEMFC has been exempted by the Minister of Minerals and Energy from many provisions of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act with regard to prospecting rights, mining rights and mining permits. According to the Chamber of Mines these provisions normally require applicants to submit environmental management programmes and to consult with interested and affected parties.

National pride was at stake in the Cape Winelands. With the world's attention focused on South Africa in the run-up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, and with

2010 having been declared the International year of Biodiversity, this year also sees the launch of a brand new certification seal for the wine industry, under the banner 'Sustainable Wines SA' (a world first), the prospecting right applications by AEMFC threatened not only the pristine winelands but the very existence of the UNESCO-registered Bottelary Conservancy as well.

Ends

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