

# Floods destroy crops

by Fidelis Zvomuya

## **Rivers surged to record heights, dams overflowed and put rural towns and already waterlogged villages on flood watch in a weeks-long crisis costing the country more than a billion rands in lost crops and farming productivity.**

Floods have hit seven of the country's nine provinces since mid-December, claiming at least 40 lives and displacing more than 6 000 people. In January, the government declared 28 municipalities disaster areas, saying damages totalling R356 million have been recorded so far in three provinces.

"We're in a new era of catastrophe," said Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs Minister Sicelo Shiceka. "We are facing losses that are far, far greater than what we've had in the past."

Mr Shiceka said they want to better equip all levels of government and society at large for extreme events in the future.

### **Estimates say billions worth of crops destroyed**

Natural disaster losses have steadily risen over decades. According to data on the South African Weather Service's website, most of the country had more than double the normal volume of rain for the month in December last year.

The Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, estimated that more than a billion rands' worth of crops have been destroyed by the recent floods.

Agri SA's economist, Dawie Maree said it is "far too early" to calculate damage caused by the floods that have drowned grape, maize and sunflower crops.

He said that even as floods were subsiding the weather bureau predicted more rain, so it may be a while before losses can be quantified, but "very tentative and early" assessments of farm losses could amount to more than a billion rand.

### **What is a flood?**

This term refers to excessive water run off or a rise in water level in a particular area that is more than the particular environment can absorb or carry. These can be caused by too much rain in a short space of time, continuous rain in the same area, blockages in rivers and streams, or failure of dam walls, as well as storms.

### **Flood warnings**

Warnings of possible floods are normally communicated by the local weather office or disaster risk management centre.

To report flooding in your area, call the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) on (012) 334 0726 or your nearest police station. The NDMC number is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When you call, a member of staff will take your details and contact the appropriate agency on your behalf.

## What to do

If flooding is forecast in your area, it means that you can expect flooding of low lying land and roads. You should check local news and weather forecasts and water levels near you, and be prepared to put any plans you have made to deal with flooding in your area into action, including:

- moving cars, pets, food, valuables and important documents to safety
- put flood protection equipment in place
- turn off gas, electricity and water supplies if it's safe to do so
- be prepared to evacuate your home.

## Try to stop any water from entering your home by:

- using sandbags and flood boards to prevent water entering through doors and windows
- sealing airbricks with plastic covers or cloths/towels
- putting plugs in sinks and baths and weighing them down with a sandbag, pillowcase or a plastic bag filled with garden soil, or a heavy object.

If you don't have valves fitted that limit the flow of water to one direction (non-return valves) you should:

- plug water inlet pipes with towels or cloths
- disconnect any equipment that uses water (like washing machines and dishwashers)
- collect the things you need for evacuation
- stay in a high place with a means of escape
- avoid electricity sources
- avoid walking or driving through flood water
- call the emergency number for your cellphone provider or the local emergency number immediately if you are in danger.

## Evacuation

If you are told to evacuate your home by the emergency services, you should do so. Refusing to leave on their advice will put you, your family and those trying to help you at risk.

When flooding has abated you should:

- keep listening to weather reports and only return to evacuated buildings if you are told that it is safe to do so
- beware of sharp objects and pollution in flood water
- get permission from the farm owner or manager before starting to clean up if your property or belongings are damaged, as it may affect insurance claims.

## Health precautions

Flood water and flooded areas can contain pollutants that can adversely affect the health and wellbeing of a person coming into contact with them. Combat this by applying basic

hygiene precautions, including washing hands after exposure, decontaminating footwear by washing and treating with a mild disinfectant, and keeping children and pets out of the contaminated area.

Where sewage is clearly visible in flood waters or in material deposited by flood waters, decontamination should involve:

- removing excess liquid (pumping/ sweeping, as appropriate)
- a thorough cleanup to remove any debris or faecal contamination
- leaving the contaminated areas to dry
- applying a mild disinfectant.

Industry tests have shown that using this approach, disinfectants should remove all traces of bacteria within 24 to 48 hours.



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## Electricity

If any electrical wiring has come into contact with flood water, a qualified electrician will need to check the safety of the system and the safety of appliances.

For help in this regard you can contact your local municipal electricity department or Eskom's contact centre on 08600 ESKOM (08600 37566)

## External flooding

When dealing with flooding to gardens, paved areas and other external areas, remember the following:

- You can clean and disinfect hard surfaces such as patios and driveways, and it is advised that these areas be avoided for three hours after disinfection.
- It is not normal practice to apply disinfectant to cultivated areas, as this can kill plants. However if you decide to do so, then only a very mild disinfectant should be applied.
- Do not hose down the garden, as this will saturate the ground and prolong the life of the bacteria.
- Do not dig over or rake the affected area, as this will spread contamination further into the soil where lack of light will prolong the life of bacteria.
- It is best to let nature take its course as tests have shown that ultra violet radiation in sunlight is very effective in killing bacteria. **UM**