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Sewage spill into river spells trouble for officials



An overflowing sewage dam at the Drakensig wastewater treatment works in Hoedspruit. /SUPPLIED

Charges laid against senior municipal staff

By **Noxolo Sibiyi**

Four senior municipal officials are facing a criminal charge after a sewage spill at a waste waterworks resulted in the pollution of a wetland and stream.

DA leader in Limpopo Marie Helm has opened a case against the Mopani district municipality officials for a September sewage spillage that affected a nearby school and a residential estate in Hoedspruit. It's alleged that the spillage seeped into the

Sand River, which is the water source in the area.

The spillage came from the municipality's Drakensig waste waterworks where one of its pumps failed, causing raw sewage to overflow.

In her affidavit to the police, Helm lists the municipal manager Tshepo Jack Mogano, CFO Sibongile Mathebula, water and sanitation senior manager Paradise Shilowa and technical services senior manager Ludic Mahayi as being responsible for ensuring that the spillage was contained, but failed to do so.

Limpopo police spokesperson Brig Hlulani Mashaba confirmed that a case of contravention of the section 15 National Water Act (NWA) is being investigated. A conviction

of this crime could result in either a fine or imprisonment.

She further states that the officials' failure to act when they were made aware of the spill had damaged the environment and posed a health risk to pupils and residents.

"The Mopani district municipality has known about these problems with the sewage system for years, but has failed to adequately address them and find long-term solutions. In-

stead, the municipality has either willfully or negligently ignored the plight of the community of Hoedspruit," the affidavit reads. Helm said she believed that the four officials have a case to answer.

"The municipal manager is the accounting officer [and] the buck stops with him. It took a long time to stop the pollution and the pump station is in acute disrepair and the backup generator is in pieces. The con-

tractor that should have repaired the generator stopped working due to alleged non-payment by the municipality. We need answers," she said.

She added that the CFO must account about the chain management processes followed while the technical managers should explain their attempts at stopping the spillage.

Additional to the criminal case, Helm reported the spillage to the department of water and sanitation, which carried out its own probe and has charged the municipality with contravening the National Water Act (NWA) and the National Environmental Act.

In response to Helm, the department said it found that the municipality had failed to manage its sewer network, resulting in the spillage and that the said pump was not authorised to contain raw sewer.

"The investigation further confirms that the containment of raw sewer within the pump for disposal at the Drakensig wastewater treatment works which triggers section 21 (g) of the NWA was commenced without authorisation," said the department in its findings.

Mopani municipal spokesperson Oda Ngobeni said they learnt about the case through the media.

"The challenge at the pump station was due to large debris which damaged the pumps. The inconsistent electricity supply was also contributing. The [waste water treatment works] WWTW is managed by the department of public works, not Mopani. It is the same with the [water treatment works] WTW and we have so far been unsuccessful in our attempts to get it transferred to the municipality for operation and maintenance."

Ngobeni said they responded late to the spillage because the Maruleng local municipality, under whom the plant falls, did not inform them about it.

"We came in as the district because we have an obligation as the water service authority to respond as and when called upon to," said Ngobeni.

Maruleng mayor Tsheko Calais Musola declined to comment.

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