



PLETTENBERG BAY RATEPAYERS AND RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION

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Chairman: Tony Blignaut

27 May 2026

Ms Pemmy Majodina

Minister of Water and Sanitation

Pretoria, Republic of South Africa
(pmajodina@parliament.gov.za)

Dear Minister Majodina,

URGENT REQUEST FOR NATIONAL INTERVENTION AND INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO BITOU MUNICIPALITY'S WATER AND SANITATION CRISIS

We write on behalf of the Plettenberg Bay Ratepayers' and Residents' Association ("PBRR") to urgently request the intervention of your office regarding the escalating water and sanitation crisis within Bitou Municipality.

While recent drought conditions intensified supply pressures, the available evidence strongly suggests that the current crisis is primarily the result of years of systemic management failures, inadequate planning, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure, lack of prioritisation, and continued development approvals beyond available municipal capacity. Bitou's own Water Services Development Plan and audit reports indicate that existing water and sanitation capacity had already been exceeded in 2025. Despite this, the municipality continues approving large-scale developments while simultaneously declaring a disaster due to water shortages and infrastructure constraints.

Particularly concerning is that, notwithstanding the highest recorded rainfall levels in approximately five years during the first four months of this year, the town remained on level 4 water restrictions due to infrastructure constraints. The challenges have escalated since the major flood events during May. Bitou Municipality now appears to be in a worse position than during the drought itself. Damage to critical abstraction, pumping, and transfer infrastructure has severely compromised the municipality's ability to access and abstract water from now abundant sources, while wastewater treatment systems are reportedly already operating at or beyond capacity.

The municipality's own records and related documentation point to longstanding shortcomings including: chronic underspending on maintenance and infrastructure; delayed augmentation projects; ageing and failing reticulation systems; staff shortages and operational constraints within the water department; and continued development approvals despite constrained water and wastewater capacity. Critical concerns reportedly include:

- underperformance and compliance failures at the desalination plant;
- non-operational transfer and pumping infrastructure intended to improve drought resilience;
- delays in developing groundwater and water reuse projects;
- wastewater treatment works operating at or beyond capacity;
- severe delays to long-term augmentation projects such as the Wadrif Dam scheme, representing what appears to be a lost decade in infrastructure planning and implementation.

At the same time, Bitou remains one of the fastest-growing municipal areas in the Western Cape, with rapid development and population growth continuing to increase demand while infrastructure expansion fails to keep pace. We are therefore deeply concerned that the municipality may not be complying with the Compulsory National Water and Sanitation Services Standards promulgated under the Water Services Act 108 of 1997 and published in Government Gazette 52814 on 6 June 2025. Regulations 11(2) and 11(3) prohibit municipalities from approving developments where sufficient water and wastewater treatment capacity does not exist. Equally concerning is that the recently approved 2026–2029 MTREF budget appears to largely adopt a “business as usual” approach and does not meaningfully prioritise the infrastructure failures and augmentation requirements underlying the current crisis.

Given the seriousness of the situation, we respectfully request that your department urgently:

1. Initiate an independent review into Bitou Municipality’s infrastructure capacity, governance failures, planning decisions, and compliance with national standards;
2. Assess whether recent development approvals comply with the Water Services Act and Compulsory National Water and Sanitation Services Standards;
3. Consider whether further approvals connected to constrained systems should be suspended pending demonstrable infrastructure augmentation;
4. Investigate the extent of historical underspending, maintenance failures, project delays, and operational shortcomings contributing to the crisis;
5. Require transparent disclosure of available water and wastewater treatment capacity together with an independently monitored recovery and implementation plan.

Minister, unless decisive intervention occurs now, we believe Bitou risks escalating into a full-scale infrastructure, environmental, economic, and public health crisis which will become progressively more difficult and costly to reverse.

We therefore respectfully appeal to your office to intervene urgently before these failures deepen further and to ensure that national legislation intended to protect communities, infrastructure, and water security is properly enforced.

Yours faithfully,

Tony Blignaut
Plettenberg Bay Ratepayers’ and Residents’ Association (PBRRA)

ANNEXURE A

SUMMARY OF KEY INFRASTRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE, PLANNING AND OPERATIONAL FAILURES CONTRIBUTING TO BITOU MUNICIPALITY’S WATER CRISIS

While drought conditions intensified recent supply pressures, the available evidence indicates that Bitou Municipality’s current water and sanitation crisis is primarily the result of accumulated systemic failures over a number of years, including inadequate planning, lack of prioritisation, chronic underinvestment in infrastructure, delayed implementation of augmentation projects, and continued development approvals beyond available capacity.

The issues below are drawn from the municipality's own Water Services Development Plan ("WSDP"), audit reports, budget documentation, and related infrastructure information.

1. Development approvals despite inadequate infrastructure capacity

- Bitou's WSDP and related audit reports indicated that water and sanitation capacity had already effectively been exceeded during 2025.
- Despite these constraints, large-scale residential and mixed-use developments continue to be approved.
- Rapid population growth and development approvals over the past 5–6 years have significantly increased water demand while infrastructure expansion has failed to keep pace.
- Wastewater treatment systems are reportedly already operating at or beyond capacity.

2. Infrastructure failures following recent floods

- Despite the highest recorded rainfall levels in approximately five years during the first four months of the year, together with major flood events during May, the municipality now appears to be in a worse position than during the drought itself.
- Damage to critical abstraction, pumping, and transfer infrastructure has severely compromised the municipality's ability to access and abstract water from now abundant sources.
- This highlights that the current crisis is no longer primarily climatic in nature, but fundamentally one of infrastructure management, maintenance failures, and inadequate resilience planning.

3. Desalination plant underperformance and compliance concerns

Reported issues include:

- operation without EIA authorisation since approximately 2010
- underperformance relative to design capacity
- ageing membranes reportedly at end of life
- replacement of multiple supply wells required
- poor siting of seawater intake points
- distribution constraints limiting effectiveness during emergencies

4. Failure of key drought resilience and transfer infrastructure

The Roodefontein transfer pipeline and associated pumping infrastructure reportedly:

- became non-operational for extended periods
- suffered vandalism and physical damage
- was partially built over in places
- was not adequately prioritised for upgrade and restoration despite its strategic importance for drought resilience and water security

5. Delays in groundwater development and augmentation projects

Reported concerns include:

- delays in developing additional high-yield boreholes
- non-operational well fields due to vandalism, lack of repairs, and missing purification infrastructure
- failure to implement planned water reuse projects
- severe delays to major long-term augmentation projects such as the Wadrif Dam scheme after the EIA process reportedly lapsed in 2021

- what appears to be a lost decade in long-term augmentation planning and implementation

6. Budgetary and maintenance shortcomings

Municipal records reportedly indicate:

- chronic underspending on already inadequate maintenance and infrastructure budgets
- capital and maintenance expenditure below National Treasury benchmarks
- slow progress on pipe replacement programmes
- ageing asbestos-based reticulation infrastructure
- historically high water losses indicating inadequate maintenance and delayed replacement programmes
- the recently approved 2026–2029 MTREF budget does not appear to meaningfully prioritise the infrastructure and augmentation failures underlying the current crisis

7. Operational and governance constraints

Reported concerns include:

- staff shortages and operational capacity constraints within the municipal water department
- delays in filling critical technical posts
- lack of prioritisation of urgent upgrades and repairs
- inadequate implementation and operational follow-through on key infrastructure projects
- limited system redundancy and insufficient resilience planning

8. Overall concern

Taken together, these issues suggest that Bitou Municipality's current crisis is not the result of drought, but rather the consequence of longstanding planning, budgeting, governance, maintenance, and implementation failures.

There is significant concern that, without urgent intervention and independent review, the municipality faces escalating risks relating to:

- direct negative impact on the poor and vulnerable
- water security
- wastewater management
- environmental degradation
- infrastructure collapse
- financial sustainability
- public health
- investor confidence and economic activity
- continued development approvals beyond sustainable servicing capacity