

Launch of National Grasslands Programme 22 May 2008

A declaration committing Government to implement the national Grasslands Programme to conserve the deteriorating grasslands will be signed at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens, on the 22nd May 2008. The Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, will be the first to sign the Declaration, and will be joined by Provincial Environmental MECs. This is the first formal commitment towards conserving South Africa's grasslands that brings together all stakeholders to conserve biodiversity in the grasslands biome.

Covering 29% of South Africa and crossing seven provinces, the grasslands biome is the second largest biome in South Africa. However, 30% of this important biome is irreversibly transformed, and less than 2% is formally conserved, falling far short of international conservation targets. With species richness second only to the Cape Floristic Region, grasslands provide vital life sustaining ecosystem services, such as carbon storage, soil and grazing for agriculture, and water. The headwaters of the country's major rivers originate in the biome, and it provides all of Gauteng's water.

Because the economic heartland of South Africa is situated within the grasslands biome, and most South Africans make their home here, it is under considerable pressure. Mining, urban development, plantation forestry and agricultural cultivation are land uses that can cause irreversible loss to biodiversity. If the health of the biome is to be maintained, their impacts need to be effectively mitigated.

Government has identified the grasslands biome as a priority for conservation action. With funding of approximately R66 million from the Global Environment Facility, the Grasslands Programme intends to secure the biodiversity and ecosystem services of the grasslands biome for current and future generations through a range of innovative initiatives and partnerships.

The Grasslands Programme will be launched on International Biodiversity Day on the 22nd of May 2008. The global theme for the 2008 International Biodiversity Day is *Biodiversity and Agriculture*.

Event: Grasslands Programme Launch

Brunch: 10:00 am

Formal Programme Begins: 11:30am-13:30pm

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