# Freshwater Ecosystems Network (2026)

## Advancing Freshwater Ecosystem Restoration: South Africa: Freshwater Challenge Roadmap

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Presenter: Ms. Esmeralda Ramburran (DFFE)

Working for Wetlands

forestry, fisheries & the environment
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- Para 19: INVITES Contracting Parties to consider the Freshwater Challenge, in line with national circumstances, as a means to enhance national implementation of the Convention on Wetlands and other global commitments as well as national priorities on freshwater ecosystem health and water security;
- https://www.ramsar.org/document/resolution-xv15-restoration-degraded-freshwater-ecosystems-support-ecological-character

# The Freshwater Challenge (FWC)

The Freshwater Challenge is a global initiative aimed at restoring 300,000 kilometres of degraded rivers and 350 million hectares of wetlands by 2030, involving over 50 countries and the European Union.

The Freshwater Challenge (FWC) is a country-led partnership that seeks to restore and protect vital freshwater ecosystems, which are crucial for biodiversity and ecosystem services.

The initiative aims to achieve the following by 2030; a) **restore** 300,000 km of degraded rivers and 350 million hectares of wetlands; b) **conserve** intact ecosystems to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem health; and c) **support countries** in achieving their international commitments related to climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development goals (SDGs)

It essentially a call for Countries to:

**Ensure** that restoration and conservation of freshwater ecosystems is integrated and properly addressed in the relevant global, regional, and national processes to tackle the climate and nature crisis and achieve sustainable development;

**Quantify** existing global ambitions and account for the contributions of the different stakeholders to restore and conserve freshwater ecosystems by supporting countries to define quantitative, geographically specific, and coherent targets across sectors and connecting targeted interventions from non-state actors with national plans and strategies;

**Accelerate** implementation of freshwater commitments by increasing the overall investment into restoration and conservation of freshwater ecosystems, mobilizing resources through existing funds and initiatives, and leveraging investments.

# FRESHWATER CHALLENGE CORE PARTNERS

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

WWF

IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

Wetlands International

UNEP United Nations Environment Programme

CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

The Nature Conservancy

At the global level, the Freshwater Challenge is supported by a group of eight Core Partners (WWF, IUCN, UNEP, Wetlands International, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, UNCCD and the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. At national level, the Challenge is coordinated by the government and open to all partners (private sector, academia, philanthropic organizations, etc).

# FRESHWATER CHALLENGE CRITERIA



# Freshwater Challenge implications for SA?

- Expression of Interest to join the Freshwater Challenge was signed on the 7th October 2025 by DFFE Minister George.
- The Focal points are DFFE Environmental Programmes with SANBI Freshwater Biodiversity Programme
- South Africa is currently in process of finalizing its Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) and Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets which also emphasized the need to ensure effective restoration of degraded terrestrial and inland water ecosystems.
- The Freshwater challenge provides an opportunity for South Africa to address the restoration of degraded wetlands and rivers in an integrated approach which will ensure synergies, knowledge sharing, partnerships and collaboration internationally and across spheres of government including mobilization of financial resources required to achieve this challenge.
- Having set these targets, qualifies South Africa as a member of the FWC. Although South Africa has a long history in setting targets, the FWC offers the Country an opportunity for support and for knowledge sharing with other members of the initiative

# Mapping a way forward

- Explore linkages to various existing strategies, policies i.e. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP)
- Alignment across Multilateral Environmental Agreements
- Develop or improve national legislation and policies for restoration of degraded freshwater ecosystems e.g., National Wetland Policy
- Resource mobilisation
- Implementation of Freshwater Ecosystem Restoration
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Coordination vehicle

# Roadmap

**Purpose**

South Africa's participation in the Freshwater Challenge provides a national delivery framework to accelerate the protection, restoration and sustainable management of freshwater ecosystems, Restore degraded rivers, wetlands, and catchments and ensure sustainable freshwater governance and financing in support of national priorities for water security, biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation and socio-economic development.

The Freshwater Challenge enables South Africa to move from fragmented freshwater interventions towards a coordinated, measurable and investment-ready national programme, aligned with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, National water and sanitation policies, and climate adaptation priorities [Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Climate Change Response Policy (NCCRP) ] commitments.

Various international conventions (e.g., Ramsar, CBD, UNCCD, SDGs) to which South Africa is a contracting party will drive freshwater restoration outcomes, and these outcomes will contribute to national reporting on progress toward achieving South Africa's Freshwater Challenge targets.

**Goal**

- To improve the ecological condition, climate resilience, and sustainable governance of South Africa's priority freshwater ecosystems by 2030, thereby strengthening long-term water security, conserving biodiversity, and enhancing climate adaptation, while aligning the Country's contributions to the objectives of relevant multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs).

# Multilateral Environmental Agreements

- The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
- The Nagoya Protocol
- Paris Agreement
- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands
- African Union Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2023–2030) (AU BSAP)
- The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2025)
- The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

# Strategic Objectives

- **Protect and Restore priority freshwater ecosystems**: Safeguard intact rivers, wetlands and strategic water source areas, and restore degraded freshwater ecosystems at scale, with a focus on ecological integrity, climate resilience and water security outcomes.
- **Strengthen freshwater governance and policy alignment**: Embed Freshwater Challenge targets within national, provincial and sectoral planning frameworks, and strengthen coordination across environment, water, climate and development sectors. Existing targets across various MEAs
- **Mobilize sustainable and diversified financing for freshwater action**: Position freshwater ecosystems as a national investment priority by mobilising blended finance that leverage domestic and international funding streams to support large-scale implementation.
- **Establish a robust national monitoring, evaluation and learning system**: Track progress of agreed targets using credible science-based indicators, aligned with national biodiversity and water assessments, and report consistently to national and global processes.
- **Build institutional capacity and promote learning and partnerships**: Strengthen institutional capacity of national, provincial and local levels, foster partnerships with civil society and the private sector, and promote knowledge sharing to support long-term sustainability.
- **Foster International Collaboration and Co-learning**: Engage in knowledge exchange, capacity building, and regional collaboration with global partners to support innovation and shared learning. COMMUNITIES

# Stakeholder mapping

## Freshwater role players?

- National Government departments
- Provincial Government departments
- Local Municipalities
- SANBI
- Society for Ecological Restoration SER
- Water Research Commission
- Universities, Academia and Research Centres
- Water Sector Capacity Development Focus Group
- Water User Associations
- Conservation Entities
- NGOs
- NPOs
- Consultants
- Freshwater Ecosystem Network FEN
- National Wetlands Society and National Wetlands Indaba

# Targets and Indicators

***Restoration***

- 61 900 hectares of wetlands in priority catchments under restoration
- 1 200 hectares of degraded estuaries restored or rehabilitated.
- 10% of hardened coastline rehabilitated.

**Protection**

- By 2035, [5 424 300] hectares are added to the land based (terrestrial and freshwater) protected and conserved area estate, including through OECMs.

**Water Security and Climate Resilience**

- 8 SWSAs expanded through Protected area expansion/ stewardship in 5 SWSAs.
- 1000 km of rivers secured under improved management in SWSAs.

**Governance and Financing**

- Mobilise 6 Billion in blended finance for freshwater restoration
- Integrate Freshwater Challenge targets into national and provincial plans

# Operational modality

- The Freshwater Challenge (FWC) Roadmap serves as South Africa's strategic foundation. It transitions the nation from fragmented freshwater interventions into a coordinated, measurable, and investment-ready national implementation program.
- Status of the Roadmap: Current sector documentation operates as a "straw dog" (working draft) and is not yet a finalized blueprint. It provides a flexible baseline to foster feedback and build consensus across sectors.

Dr Farai Tererai
South African National biodiversity Institute (SANBI)
Biodiversity Research, Assessment & Monitoring
Pretoria National Botanical Gardens
Address: 2 Cussonia Street, Brummeria
Pretoria
Telephone number +27 (0)12 843 5285
Email address f.tererai@sanbi.org.za

Ms. Esmeralda Ramburran
Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries
Address: The Environment House, 473 Steve Biko Road, Arcadia, Pretoria, 0083
Telephone: 067 417 3833
Email address: ERamburran@dffe.gov.za

# THANK YOU!