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Karoo enters an uncertain future as government approves prospecting for hydraulic fracturing

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Minister of Minerals and Energy, Mosebenzi Zwane, announced last Thursday that government policy would make provision for energy companies to start prospecting for shale gas in the Karoo. This decision follows the release of the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for Shale Gas in 2016, which aimed to provide a more holistic assessment of the impact of shale gas extraction on the economy, environment and people. Among the findings of the SEA report was that job opportunities within the shale gas sector would be less than what was widely proclaimed and that the availability of water would be a restricting factor for hydraulic fracturing (fracking) in the Karoo.

In August 2016, after carefully considering the available evidence, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) adopted the position that impacts from fracking are poorly understood and that the current regulatory framework is insufficiently equipped to properly regulate the activity. The combined effect would be an unquantified risk that could not be adequately mitigated and which would present a significant risk to people's health, landscapes and biodiversity. This is still our position and, as such, we are deeply concerned about the ramifications of Thursday's announcement. While some people may argue that prospecting is not exploration we foresee the issues above manifesting in the prospecting phase and that the latter will inevitably pave the way for exploration.

It is also possible that factors such as the economic viability (extraction and transportation costs) and lack of water in the Karoo required for fracking will limit the scale of shale gas extraction. However, this simply makes the fact that companies want to continue with exploration so much more risky and uncertain and, as such, we do not consider these factors as sufficient reason to dismiss the threat of hydraulic fracturing.

In his statement, the Minister alluded to steps that will be taken to ensure the protection of water resources, agricultural resources and the environment. His statement was, however, not specific about what such steps will entail and does nothing to dispel current observations of poor compliance

experienced in the mining sector in South Africa leading to ongoing environmental damage. As such, we are deeply concerned about the ability of government to manage and mitigate the risks of hydraulic fracturing.

South Africa's leading science advisory body, the Council for Science and Industrial Research (CSIR) has urged the government to give serious thought to the potentially "devastating effects" on scarce water supplies before authorising widespread shale gas fracking. The Academy of Science of South Africa also cautioned that promises of quick economic riches seemed far from conclusive and that fracking could in fact lead to widespread job losses in rural areas such as the Karoo, along with polluted water, polluted air and "significant" earthquakes. The EWT is of the opinion that fracking will not result in broad based economic beneficiation and will devalue other sustainable economic activities in the Karoo such as tourism and agriculture.

Fracking is technically complicated, will require novel regulations, and trained officials to monitor and enforce compliance. Impacts will be irreparable and costly to rehabilitate to even a functional state. Currently our government departments are not equipped to deal with this.

The Karoo contains fragile ecosystems and the possible impact of fracking on water resources remains a great concern. Experiences in the Xolobeni mining dilemma on the Eastern Cape's Wild Coast demonstrate that a contentious development such as fracking can result in social "fracturing" and increased polarisation between different sectors of society.

The EWT will continue to monitor these developments and actively engage government and stakeholders where habitats and biodiversity are threatened. In particular, the EWT intends to, among other actions, develop a comprehensive response to the decision to allow prospecting for shale gas and to communicate this to government. We will also meet with partner organisations to develop a targeted grassroots action plan to address fracking in the Karoo and the rest of the country. We will also investigate and interrogate the validity of prospecting permits that have already been issued or that are in the process of being issued.

Globally, South Africa has developed one of the most successful government-private sector business models in terms of the renewable energy sector. Given the close ties between energy, water and food security – and the urgent requirement to protect the resilience of our natural capital under future uncertain climate scenarios – we argue that the country can, and should, develop an alternative energy vision that excludes the use of shale gas. While wind and solar energy development still have environmental and social impacts, these impacts can largely be mitigated and compliance can be governed and enforced.

The Karoo, and South Africa in general, is facing a renewed onslaught of mining applications. Worryingly, recent applications have also been made for mining within protected environments. This new trend seems to indicate that environmental protection has taken second place in government policy and potentially signifies the erosion of section 24 of the Constitution, which states that every person "has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing and to have the environment protected through reasonable legislative measures". This is a significant concern, and environmental and social role-players will have to rise to this challenge to ensure the protection of our natural heritage and livelihoods.

For more information, please refer to the [EWT's position statement on Hydraulic fracturing](#)

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