

Outcomes of Tests Done on Water Produced at the Ezakheni Water Treatment Works and Forced Closure of this WTW during Protest Action

Issued by the Corporate Stakeholder Management Unit, Office of the Chief Executive, Pietermaritzburg

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On Monday, 9th March 2020, as protest action flared in Ladysmith, a WhatsApp message began circulating widely, urging consumers not to drink “water that comes out of your taps this morning because it has been poisoned”.

While the message was vague as it did not identify the nature of the purported “poison”, where or how it had been placed in the water supply system, Umgeni Water nevertheless acted swiftly on becoming aware of its existence. In line with water quality testing protocols, Umgeni Water Management sent a member of staff on the same day to Ladysmith to take samples of potable water that is produced at the Ezakheni Water Treatment Works (WTW). This WTW is operated and maintained by Umgeni Water, while provision of drinking water directly to consumers is the responsibility of the Water Services Authority, in this instance uThukela District Municipality.

Potable water samples were taken from three areas that are representative of the final treated water leaving the WTW and of reticulation points. Samples were taken from the Ezakheni WTW and two reticulation points, namely Ezakheni Police Station and Ezakheni ML Sultan School. These reticulation points are fed by Assvoelkop Reservoir and Abbatoir Reservoir respectively.

Comprehensive testing of these samples to assess water quality and suitability for domestic uses began on the evening of 9th March 2020 and a report was released on Wednesday, 11th March 2020. These tests were done in Umgeni Water’s ISO 17025 Accredited Laboratory in Pietermaritzburg, and were in conformance with South African National Standards (SANS) 241: 2015 for drinking water quality.

The analytical results, released on Wednesday morning, were:

Ezakheni Water Works (Final): The water quality results complied with the SANS 241: 2015 stipulations. Therefore, available water quality data indicates that the water sampled is suitable for domestic uses.

Ezakheni Police Station (Reticulation): The water quality results from this sampling point also complied with the SANS 241: 2015 stipulations. Therefore, available water quality data indicates that the water sampled is suitable for domestic uses.

Ezakheni ML Sultan School (Reticulation): Similarly, water quality results from this sampling point complied with SANS 241:2015 stipulations. Therefore, available water quality data indicates that the water sampled is suitable for domestic uses.

These tests were conducted in addition to routine monitoring that is done by Umgeni Water in line with SANS 241: 2015 and they were part of initiatives to try to address concerns of uThukela District Municipality and consumers following circulation of the WhatsApp message.

It can be concluded from the sampling exercise that data obtained indicates samples of water tested from the Ezakheni Water Treatment Works is suitable for domestic purposes.

By Thursday, 12th March 2020, the Ezakheni WTW remained closed. Staff were forced to stop production of potable water and leave the premises when a group of people arrived there on Monday night and said protest action would occur the following morning that the plant would not be allowed to operate.

Access to the plant has become extremely difficult as a result of the road that leads to it being blocked with rubble and a deep trench having been dug across it.

Discussions have taken place between the political leadership of the Provincial Government of KwaZulu-Natal and organisers of the protest action. Management of Umgeni Water are hoping that there is a speedy resolution to the situation in order for its staff to resume production and supply of potable water. It is unfortunate that forced closure of the plant has occurred when need for water is imperative. Umgeni Water staff have been inundated with requests for information as to when the plant will be reopened.

Also of concern to Umgeni Water is safety of its staff and the infrastructure it operates. The organisation will not expose its employees to danger in a volatile situation and wishes to reiterate that operators of the plant in Ezakheni will return to work when it is safe to do so and when the situation stabilises.

