

DISASTER DEBRIEFING

**DECEMBER 2004 CUT OFF LOW: OVERBERG, CAPE
WINELANDS CENTRAL KAROO AND EDEN DISTRICT
MUNICIPALITIES**

**COMMISSIONED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF PROVINCIAL
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING**



**BY THE DISASTER MITIGATION FOR SUSTAINABLE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the 22nd December 2004 a Cut off Low triggered widespread flooding and rain damage across the Western Cape, specifically affecting the Overberg, Cape Winelands Central Karoo and Eden District Municipalities. The extreme weather and subsequent flooding had severe direct and indirect impacts to local municipal infrastructure, the agricultural sector and vulnerable communities, such as households adjacent to riverine environments, low income housing and informal settlements.

On the 22nd December at 14h30 the Weather Service issued a “Severe Weather Warning” after on-the-ground reports from rain affected towns in the Western Cape. By the 23 December, 188.2 mm rainfall was recorded by the official SAWS rainfall station in Robertson, 104.5mm in Swellendam, 168mm in Heidelberg, 167.2mm in Riversdale, 70.6mm in George and 218.8mm in Knysna. In Heidelberg, Robertson and Swellendam this rainfall was the highest recorded rainfall since the March 2003 cut off low, which in 2003 had been the highest recorded rainfall for one day in more than 23 years (DiMP, 2003).

The extreme weather system, extending far greater than 800 km moved eastwards over the interior until the 23 December, resulting in continued rainfall and gale-force winds over this period. This weather system triggered riverine flooding, landslides, excessive runoff on roads and steep slopes, as well as a host of other rain related impacts.

By 09h00 on the 22nd December emergency situations were being reported across the four districts. Reports included damage to critical infrastructure, households at risk to being flooded by rising floodwaters, roads being impassable and so on. The rapid onset and intensity of the rainfall required a rapid emergency response. Over the four districts, 10 people had to be airlifted off roofs and many towns housed people in halls overnight. In total it was reported that 3 636 houses and 40 business premises sustained rain or flood damage, due to riverine flooding, excessive runoff caused by blocked drains or steep slopes and rain related impacts. Of these 2 703 were reportedly informal or low income households. In Heidelberg and Suurbraak several cases of water related illness such as diarrhoea were apparently reported.

By 11h00 on the 22nd December 2004 the first JOC was formed and by the end of the day all four districts had JOC's up and running. Breede River Winelands municipality was the only local level municipality to set up a JOC and this, as is elaborated on later in the report, is seen as a case of best practice. Most of the district level JOC's encountered many difficulties in co-ordinating and managing the emergency response due to challenges posed by the spatial extent of the affected areas as well as accessibility and communication problems.

Direct economic losses exceeding R23 million were reported by local and district level municipalities across the four districts. The Eden and Overberg municipalities sustained the highest losses, with R16,7 million and R3,03 million respectively. Commercial farmers sustained R24,5 million worth of damages, which included damage to infrastructure, loss of soil, loss of livestock and agricultural equipment such as tractors and water pumps. Compounding this loss was the fact that many of the municipalities had just spent similar amounts on repair, recovery and rehabilitation due to the similar in scale 2003 event. This 'double whammy' effect occurring in less than one year, has made recovery a major challenge to many of the municipalities involved.

Furthermore, as the event was not classified a disaster due to the fact that Disaster Management legislation is currently in a process of transition, with the 'roll out' of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 and the National Disaster Management Framework. The result is that a 'legislative vacuum' has developed, which has meant that neither a National Fund nor Provincial Contingency Funds were available to finance post disaster recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction. The implications were that a disaster could not be 'classified' and therefore Municipalities, Districts and Province had to fund repairs themselves or through the Municipal Infrastructural Grants (MIG).

The December 2004 Cut off Low therefore provides an important case study to assess institutional mechanisms to recover, reconstruct and rehabilitate following an extreme weather event, without the classification of a disaster. In April 2005 the Disaster Mitigation for Sustainable Livelihoods (DiMP) at the University of Cape Town was commissioned by Provincial Disaster Management of the Western Cape to conduct a post disaster assessment, in this case referred to as a Disaster Debriefing.

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