



St Helena  
Government



## ST HELENA WATER PRESS CONFERENCE

**MONDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2017**

**Panel:** Chief Executive Officer, Connect Saint Helena Ltd - Barry Hubbard  
Legislative Council Member - Hon Derek Thomas  
Operations Director of Connect Saint Helena Ltd - Leon De Wet  
Emergency Planning Manager - Ian Johnson  
Head of Agriculture & Natural Resources Division - Darren Duncan

**Media Representatives:** South Atlantic Media Services - Anne Clarke  
Saint FM - Tammy Williams

Press Conference coordinated by Head of News, Kerisha Stevens, SHG Press Office

*Conference began at 1.41pm*

*Introduction from Head of News, Kerisha Stevens –*

Good afternoon everyone and thank you all for attending today's press conference and to our radio listeners for joining us. We're here today to update the public on the current water situation on St Helena. As we all are aware, water resources remain seriously low on the Island. We have been urging residents to continue to exercise great care and restraint when using water in order to preserve the little resources that we have.

As we did with our first press conference on the water situation, in the lead up to today both Saint FM and SAMS have been gathering questions and comments from the public on what they would like to have answers to, so thank you to everyone who did call in. Many of the questions received are of a similar theme to last time, but I understand the media have grouped them accordingly. We have about 45mins for the briefing, and what questions we can't answer today we will commit to following up in future articles in the press. So now I'll hand you over to the panel and ask them to introduce themselves before we turn to the media for their questions.

*Panel introduces themselves.*

**Questions:**

*Tammy Williams asks Leon De Wet:* **The smell of chlorine from Hutt's Gate is really stink and overwhelming. Is this because the water has such bad E-coli levels that Connect is trying to cover the contamination? Can the people that run Connect confirm that chlorine being added to the water is being managed by a qualified person and that Connect themselves do random checks to see that the required amount of chlorine is adhered to?**

*Leon De Wet:* The situation with the chlorine is fluctuating at the moment because as you probably know we're bringing water from all over the Island. We're pumping water from Hutt's Gate to Red Hill and we're bringing water in from the fire tank through Borehole 5. All these different sources have different make-ups in terms of chemical balance, especially the pH levels, which vary from source to source. We have pH probes in each of these plants which control and, to a certain extent, direct the dosing regime. It fluctuates constantly and because these volumes are brought in overnight or during the day, it takes a while for the plant to adjust. So, unfortunately, there is a downside to the process that we follow, it doesn't come down to one individual not doing his bit. Unfortunately the plants are very susceptible to any small changes and then they adjust accordingly.

*Tammy Williams asks Leon De Wet:* **People have to buy bottled water during this time because they are afraid or they don't want to use the water that's coming out of the tap. Does Connect have a comment on that and do they understand the frustrations this is causing with consumers at the moment?**

*Leon De Wet:* Yes I can appreciate that. Again the water quality is still as before, although there might be more chlorine in the water, it still meets the European Union standards for water quality. There is no concern and people do not necessarily need to boil the water just because it's a bit off-colour or has a bit more chlorine in it. There is no problem with the quality of the water, people can still consume that.

*Tammy Williams asks Leon De Wet:* **I can confirm that this is a question from a Sandy Bay farmer. Why is it that Solomon's coffee grounds at Sandy Bay are allowed to use sprinklers but the Sandy Bay farmers, they have no water?**

*Leon De Wet:* We actually followed up on this because it was also raised last week. There is no evidence that any farmer requested an exemption in Sandy Bay and has not been granted that. And I expect none of the farmers, other than obviously Solomon's, have an exemption notice. The reason why Solomon's are allowed to use the water in Sandy Bay is because we don't have bowsers or resources to collect water from Sandy Bay, so therefore instead of it running out to sea it is being consumed. But as I said, we have no documented proof that any one of the Sandy Bay farmers has requested an exemption on water consumption.

*Tammy Williams asks Leon De Wet:* **My last question for Leon is how Connect have started refusing waterlines to private residences and, obviously this probably will be okay in the short term, have you thought about the long-term effects of this? What happens when months down the line Connect has to refuse waterlines to people who are building homes, will this not affect construction and people moving into their homes?**

*Leon De Wet:* You can appreciate again that we are cautious in terms of just allowing people to be connected to the network. We need to find out what their consumptions would be in order for us to determine where they are and how that would affect the volume of water available in any particular area. There are a few that have been deferred for review, but nobody has been rejected. On the construction side, we have given exemption for construction because in most places where a house is built or a foundation, the consumption is down to about one cubic metre per week that they use in order to build. There's not a real problem there. In actual fact we have already connected a number of people that are reliant on springs onto our network to help them through this period. We obviously review every application to make sure that it's sensible.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet:* **How much of the Island's water is being sourced from Borehole 5 and what is being done to ensure that it does not run dry?**

*Leon De Wet:* At the moment we are quite dependent on the water that comes from the fire tank via Borehole 5. Borehole 5 has proven itself over time to be quite reliable. We constantly monitor the static level in the borehole and also look at the rate of recovery after we suck about 300 cubic metres of water, on average, a day from that source. Obviously the water table will be a good indicator of whether the borehole is in actual fact starting to give us problems. It has dropped about 100mm since the beginning of November, in terms of the static level, which is insignificant. It appears to be still strong and we are very much reliant on that.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet:* **How much would it cost for St Helena to have a desalination plant?**

*Leon De Wet:* A desalination plant has always been given consideration. It is very costly and we are mindful that less than one per cent of the world's population is dependent on desalination plants. For us it would be feasible in the long run, after we have considered all our options. But in the short-term, it is not a cheap solution. To install a plant let's say at Rupert's, we would need effectively two 500 cubic metre plants and from that we would supply the Hutt's Gate zone and Red Hill zone. The problem is that it's not just the plant that needs to be installed, we would need to lay a total of about 11km of pipeline to transfer the water up to the treatment works. The cost of the plant plus pump stations and pipelines - our projection is that it will cost about £3 million. To run a plant like that is actually the long-term problem and

concern. That is one of the reasons why desalination worldwide has only in extreme circumstances been implemented. Because of the running cost, we are looking at, at least £20 per cubic metre of cost, whereas now people pay around £1.30 per cubic metre. The cost would significantly increase if we do introduce a desalination plant.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet: **Are there any benefits of having a desalination plant on St Helena?***

*Leon De Wet:* There are obviously benefits in that we are surrounded by the ocean so ultimately drawing water from the ocean will be a source that is always available. There are downsides to it as well. Obviously, after the reverse osmosis process, brine will need to be pumped back into the ocean. Again, if we look at a site like Rupert's, you can't just discharge the brine into the bay as it will cause a major environmental impact.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet: **Do you have a possible idea when the water restrictions will be over? What if it does not rain?***

*Leon De Wet:* We have formally stated before that we are aiming to get the reservoir levels up to 50%. We are currently in the region of about 10%, which is a long way off. To be safe we will continue to work towards 50%. We will not lift the restrictions yet. If it doesn't rain then we are in trouble, we have managed to hold out quite well up until now, our levels are more or less similar to what we had in November.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet: **If we continue on our current water consumption rate, is there a likelihood of the water being shut off in certain places around the Island in the coming future?***

*Leon De Wet:* No, we are not considering that at all. Water is a primary need for everyone. If need be, we might look at rationing people's supplies, but we won't shut it off altogether. In any case there are major operational downfalls that come with it so we won't consider that.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet: **If the Island cannot depend on sufficient rainfall what is our alternative source of water?***

*Leon De Wet:* We are very dependent on rainfall as surface collection is our primary source of collecting water. A consultant has been appointed to do an analysis and prepare a draft report which will form the basis of a drilling contract. This report is expected at the end of the month. Drilling contractors have also been commissioned and they will be on-Island in March to work with the consultant to look at the possibility of drilling ten exploration boreholes. If they do provide us with a good yield, we will be able to use them straight away. At the same time that will also help us monitor the water levels on the Island and also the quality of the water available to us through these boreholes. This is our first objective for now other than the transfer systems which we have partly installed and are in operation.

*Anne Clarke asks Leon De Wet: **Is it true that our household bills for the use of water will increase?***

*Leon de Wet:* It all depends. In our current situation it won't. But obviously if we roll over to a desalination plant and those kinds of things then it will. In the short term though, there will be no increase.

*Anne Clarke asks Ian Johnson: **Who are the Resilience Forum, how was it picked, and what have you done so far to help us in this water situation?***

*Ian Johnson:* The Resilience Forum replaces the previous structure in government - the Disaster Management Committee. The Resilience Forum is based on the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Its role is to oversee emergency planning arrangements for the Island based on an ongoing process of threat risk assessment. It's coordinated by myself on behalf of the Director of Police who in turn is responsible to the Governor who has overall responsibility and strategic oversight for ensuring contingency planning arrangements are in place for St Helena. Members have the appropriate authority to make decisions and commitments on behalf of their department or organisation. The forum is chaired by the Chief of Police. Members are myself, senior representatives from the police, fire, sea rescue, health, ENRD, LegCo, immigration, port authority and customs and the Airport. We also have representatives from utilities in the private sector being Sure, Connect, Solomon's and representation from the Salvation Army. What we have done so far to help? Well when the trigger point was reached in Connect's plan, I was contacted and then I organised a meeting of the Resilience Forum and that was to assist and coordinate actions with the provider and then other agencies to help out with the water crisis. One of the things that came up very early was, if you remember, a reservoir at Levelwood was contaminated and it was the Resilience Forum who organised and coordinated getting bottled water to all the residents in Levelwood during that crisis until it was alleviated. We've arranged for the water from the swimming pool to be pumped out and provided a bowser from LEMP to deliver water to ENRD and some of the farmers and we've assisted Connect with providing another bowser.

*Anne Clarke asks Ian Johnson: **Why doesn't Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha go into drought, what are they doing that's different and why aren't we taking a page from their book?***

*Ian Johnson:* The answer to that is probably their location. Ascension Island, as we all know, is near the equator. We could say that Ascension has been in drought since the early part of the century because their water collection from Green Mountain is very very small. It was the BBC in the early sixties who paid for a desalination plant on the island and with a population of only 500 that is fine for them. Then later on in 2003 the United States provided the osmosis plant so they get all the water from that because they don't get much rain water. On the opposite end to that we have Tristan, further down in the South Atlantic. The winds that affect

Tristan are the roaring forties, which of course bring all the weather and they don't suffer a lack of rainfall. They get plenty of rain and that's where they get their water from. We're slightly different because we're further north, near the equator, but we do get rainfall. The only thing is, which is being highlighted here, is we've not been getting the normal rainfall that we have every year.

*Anne Clarke asks Ian Johnson:* **How can the public assist in getting our act together and ensure the Island doesn't go into drought every few years?**

*Ian Johnson:* Well hopefully we won't have a drought every few years when everything's put into place, but follow the tips we've put out and do your best to save water.

*Tammy Williams asks Darren Duncan:* **A farmer has been stopped from using water on his current crops but LEMP are still using water for endemics. Could you explain why to us?**

*Darren Duncan:* Yes I can. Obviously farmers that do not have current exemptions from Connect Saint Helena for irrigating their current crops would not be entitled to water from public sources. However, the LEMP programme is using water from the swimming pool in Jamestown and they also operate via an exemption provision provided under the Airport programme which is renewable from Connect Saint Helena on a month-by-month basis.

*Tammy Williams asks Darren Duncan:* **SHG buildings have wide roofs like, for example the CCC. Is there a form of water capture to help with vehicle cleaning and watering of gardens? Should we be thinking this way in future?**

*Darren Duncan:* St Helena Government is thinking this way. With some of the larger buildings, like the ANRD site, this is already happening. As funding is becoming available we are adding additional large tanks to the ANRD site. New tanks are also being installed at some of the Government landlord housing sites such as New Ground and there are also plans for Moores Flats as well. In terms of going forward, SHG is looking at new building projects like the prison and fire station. All of these buildings will include rainwater capture systems attached so that water can be used for landscaping, vehicle cleaning etc.

*Anne Clarke asks Barry Hubbard:* **Where exactly are we with the water situation? How much time before the Island runs out of water?**

*Barry Hubbard:* It's critical but stable. Water stocks are approximately 12% of reservoir volumes, which is about 15,000 cubic metres of water. The average consumption is about 900 cubic metres so far this month. The public is doing their bit on restraining their consumption. Consumption is down compared to last year, which is excellent. Surface water sources are continuing to dry up, that is the problem when you rely so heavily on surface water for supply, which in turn are putting more pressure on the boreholes. Our only real secure source of water is Borehole 5 drilled

for the Airport construction. We have done 8000 trips now which is a total of 37,000 cubic metres of water. The question is how long will it last? If you look at the stock we have at the moment and assume that no more water comes into the system and we are consuming 900 cubic metres a day, then that stock will last for 17 days. But before people panic, remember that I did say, it's critical but stable. So it's stable, but still not a very good situation to be in.

*Anne Clarke asks Barry Hubbard:* **It is extremely difficult not to be negative in our current situation. It appears nothing has been learnt from the previous water crisis on the Island. Is it bad enough this year for SHG to dish out money to make a permanent solution?**

*Barry Hubbard:* What we see now is very different to 2013. In 2013, there was plenty of water on the Island, it was just in the wrong place. So what we did was put in some transfer systems and they have since been used reliably. The problem this year is that there isn't any water anywhere, so we are using the transfer systems to move stuff about, but it's a very different dynamic to what it was in 2013.

*Anne Clarke asks Barry Hubbard:* **2013 was the last time the Island experienced a drought as serious as this one. What was put in place to ensure it wouldn't happen again? Why hasn't it worked?**

*Barry Hubbard:* There were a number of things. The record keeping when we had our first drought in 2013 was awful. So, the records are much more robust and comprehensive now than they were then. Now we've got an early warning system, so we are aware of exactly what's happening with our reservoir stocks and consumption. We also have a written plan in place which was done in 2013. We have now updated that plan and are currently working to it. When we had our review from the regulator a few months ago, he wanted to examine how we were managing the drought. He was satisfied with how it is being managed and that is all documented in the Regulator's Report which is on the SHG website.

*Anne Clarke asks Derek Thomas:* **Why are we back in a similar situation to 2013, were there not measures put in place to prevent the same from happening again?**

*Derek Thomas:* Let me perhaps first say that in April 2013 SHG divested the water and electricity to Connect. It was shortly after that in May that we had the drought crisis, resulting in an internal audit being carried out which made a number of recommendations. I have to say a lot of those recommendations, from what I can see, has been put in place by Connect and has also aided and assisted Connect, especially in relation to data collection, with our current drought crisis. I will also say that when the water and electricity was divested, Connect took on the operation and the systems were in very poor condition at the time. So there is nobody to blame here. SHG is always facing a number of priorities. The Government in 2013 did see water as being a top priority and we've seen from our Capital Programme Funding

that there has been an enlargement of Harpers reservoir and also an additional reservoir is being constructed at Hutt's Gate. Connect themselves, from their own allocated funding, have relined some of the current reservoirs which were something like 30 years old if not older. I also know that Connect has plans to construct additional reservoirs, obviously subject to funding. They plan to add a reservoir to Levelwood and also enlarge the current reservoir there. Signs are also in place for a large earth dam in Fisher's Valley. The government has also, subject to the business case put forward by Connect, funded the transporting of water via bowsers which has been going on for a number of months, all with no additional cost to the consumer. That has been funded by DFID after a case was made to them. DFID has also provided funding for transfer systems. I think Leon alluded to the transfer system from Chubb's Spring to the Scott's Mill reservoir, which I understand has been completed. There are also two other transfer systems on the way from the Airport to Hutt's Gate and Sharks Valley to Hutt's Gate. So I will say that SHG is treating the water crisis as a serious situation and it has been given top priority. DFID are also carrying out works in the UK doing hydronic design work and feasibility studies exploring the ground water systems. Like Leon said, contractors will be on-Island in March to do some drilling in the deep boreholes to establish what water we have there. There was a mention about desalination, which is something government have been talking about for a while. Leon gave the explanation as to why although it is possible, it would cost a lot of money. If all other options fail though, that would probably be the only option left and we will have no choice but to consider. So a lot is happening and lessons have been learnt from 2013. The audit was carried out and government do call Connect in from time to time for an update and progress on the recommendations made. The majority of those recommendations have been implemented and like I said it has greatly assisted Connect with this current crisis we have on our hands.

*Anne Clarke asks Derek Thomas: **Is it safe to say that the measures that have been put in place will prevent this from happening again?***

*Derek Thomas:* I can't say it'll prevent, but it will certainly go some way to assist and improve. We very much rely on rain but with the additional capacity, we'll have a greater level of storage which will obviously last over a longer period. There are plans for further reservoirs as Connect has put forward their proposals which will be considered alongside other Island priorities. So hopefully, when the rain comes, we will have the capacity for the storage requirements.

*Anne Clarke asks Barry Hubbard: **Mr Hubbard, Who is responsible for the water situation we are currently in? Is it Connect or was an issue left over from SHG and nothing has been put into place to address them yet?***

*Barry Hubbard:* I think the question has already been answered, but I'll pick back over my points again. There has been decades of underinvestment in the water systems for the reasons that Derek explained. So now Connect is working with SHG

so that we can get these systems back up to a reasonable state. When Connect was divested it was left with £15million worth of fully depreciated assets, which basically means worn out. So we got £15million worth of worn out equipment that we are trying to upgrade and repair and put right, which is the reason for a lot of things from leaks to drought. So it is nobody's fault but we are trying to do the best we can to make things right and we're doing it together.

***Anne Clarke asks Barry Hubbard: It is hoped that the Airport will bring in tourists to the Island in the near future, which would mean more people on-Island consuming water. What is the plan to ensure that we have enough water to supply both tourists visiting the Island and St Helenians?***

*Barry Hubbard:* So the first sources to dry up are always the surface water sources. We rely more heavily on the boreholes, like Borehole 5, which we all know was built on the Airport site. With the program that we will be undertaking we hope to get boreholes with a similar type of yield and quality in more convenient areas. We have got a hydrogeologist that has taken reports that were conducted in the past from people who have looked at the water situation on-Island and where the aquifers are. We have now provided a company called WSP, which has a specialist division in this area, with all these reports. They have looked at those overseas and will visit the Island with a drilling contract and conduct some trial borehole drilling. If that is successful, then we have a sustainable source of water that we can call on when the surface water is not there. As Leon and Derek both said, if that fails then we are probably into a very expensive desalination situation. We don't want to go there, but technically it is a possibility and something that would be very unpopular.

***Tammy Williams asks Leon De Wet: I would just like to ask Leon this question. When it comes to complaints about the quality of water, how do people complain Leon? Is there a process people can go through?***

*Leon De Wet:* Yes, we have a formal complaints procedure in place, so if someone has a complaint, we do go and investigate. Most of the time we know about these things in advance. A lot of times we find that there may be a leakage or a burst and soil gets into the piping systems, so some of these problems are short-lived. But there is a complaints procedure and we are audited on that as well as in how we handle complaints. We deal with it as soon as we can so when people have problems they can call us directly or send an email and we will then deal with it as appropriately as we can.

***Tammy Williams asks Derek Thomas: Derek, if I could ask you. The money that was approved by DFID, would the public be able to know how much was actually approved?***

*Derek Thomas:* Unfortunately I don't have the figures, but I am certain I can make that available to you.

*Tammy Williams asks Derek Thomas: **Between Connect and SHG, who has sourced additional funding from DFID, what is the political oversight and what can people expect from this money?***

*Derek Thomas:* The process is that Connect will have to make their case for funding for these additional projects. I have already alluded to some that have been completed but they do have plans for additional reservoirs for additional capacity. They will bring that forward from the new financial year and we will have to look at that together with other priorities from the allocated funding we will have on the Capital Programme. I can't give any guarantee as I am just one member of ExCo and there will be a number of priorities, but that is the process we will have to take.

*Tammy Williams asks Barry Hubbard: **There is a comment from somebody that says Connect has new cars so there is obviously money in the pot. What will Connect do now in terms of forward planning and give the consumer value for money?***

*Barry Hubbard:* We did inherit a load of very old cars that just wouldn't start in the morning and you just can't run a business with rubbish vehicles. We do have new cars and that puts us in a much better position to perform. In terms of money in the pot, we have a depreciation fund which is something that didn't exist when we divested initially. It's something we agreed with councillors that we would build into our budgets. So a lot of the repair works, relining the reservoirs, things that Derek spoke about, this is all stuff that, although originally not budgeted for, Connect now takes care of. The other forward planning, I think our tariff income from water is about £300,000 a year, a reservoir costs over £400,000. So these are huge projects that if Connect had to pay for, the consumer would have bills considerably more than they currently are. This is where we rely on support from SHG through the Capital Programme. Those works are prioritised and everybody gets the benefits once they're completed. We have moved on a long way, if you look at the regulators report we hit every target that was set from a benchmark of divestment. So after three years they have all been exceeded. So I know people complain and they see that there are lots of bursts and power outages, but there is nowhere near as many as there were when we divested. So some things are working even if people don't see that.

*There were no further questions.*

*The conference concluded at 2.28pm.*

*Duration: 47mins*

**St Helena Resilience Forum  
22 February 2017**