



A view of River Nile. Uganda is one of the few countries in the world with fresh water rivers, lakes and underground water. People need to ensure such resources are not depleted

Ugandans urged to get water permits

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

Water is one of the most important natural resources on earth, but it is badly utilised, with some areas becoming water stressed.

Uganda is one of the few countries in the world endowed with fresh water rivers, lakes and underground water. However, this water can be depleted if mismanaged.

It is estimated that in 20 years' time, Uganda will be water stressed if nothing is done to manage the situation. Water stress is a term used to describe when demand for water is greater than the amount of water available at a certain period in time, and also when water is of poor quality restricting its usage. Water stress means deterioration in both the quantity and quality of water available.

The depletion is manifested by rivers such as Rwizi, Mpanga and several other water sources that are drying up countrywide.

Communities in areas such as Kiruhura and Gulu districts are water stressed, while in other areas, water sources have been polluted by industrial waste, making the water unsafe for human consumption.

Although there have been warnings of water being depleted or polluted, many people are illegally diverting rivers and streams to their gardens, while others are pumping water for irrigation in an unregulated manner.

Consequently, the Ministry of Water and Environment has called for regulated water usage for sustainability and urges water users to acquire water permits.

The Directorate of Water Resources Management (DWRM) prohibits the taking, using, damming or diverting

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of water unless it is authorised by the directorate.

The assistant commissioner of DWRM, Albert Orijabo, says: "We use permits as a tool to ensure that water resources are sustainably managed to meet the aspirations of the nation."

He says due to poor water quality as a result of pollution, there was need to regulate how industries discharge waste to protect the environment.

"There is growth of industrialisation and the construction industry, more people are getting involved in irrigation and the population has increased. Therefore, there is a lot of competition for water resources. The demand is outstripping the supply and we need to regulate this for equitable distribution," Orijabo says.

He also highlights climate change, which is affecting the quality and quantity of water resources.

"Vision 2040 aims at transforming Uganda from a peasant to a modern society and that transformation requires investment in sectors such as agriculture and energy, which require enormous amounts of water. So, we have to save the water," Orijabo says.

Types of water permits

The permits issued by the DWRM include the surface water and groundwater abstraction, waste water discharge, drilling and hydraulic works construction.

The Government developed a framework under which it can regulate

the use of water and discharge of water waste in the environment.

The drilling permit is issued to borehole drilling companies, while the construction permit is for construction works across a water body like a bridge or dam. The surface water abstraction permit is for diverting water for irrigation, hydropower generation, pumping water for construction or road works.

"If you divert a river or stream or pump water using motorised pumps without a permit, that is an illegal activity which is punishable by law," Orijabo says.

The ground water abstraction permit is only issued to people using motorised pumps to draw water from underground.

"If you are using a manual pump, it is okay. But if you are using a generator, motorised or solar powered pump, you must have a permit," Orijabo says.

The waste water discharge permit is issued to industries and factories which discharge waste.

Orijabo says it is allowed under the law to use fresh water for reasonable domestic needs or for animals, provided there is no adverse effect on the environment.

"People who go to wells or shallow wells do not need permits. It is the people who are using water in a way that can cause adverse environmental effects, who do," Orijabo clarifies.

Benefits of the permit

Orijabo says the permit is a tool used by the ministry to ensure water resources are well and equitably utilised.

He gave an example of Mbarara town where River Rwizi, which has companies such as the National Water and Sewerage Company, Coca Cola, Nile Breweries and dairy businesses, all using the same water, along with the ecosystem that depends on it.

Each of the above companies has a water permit regarding the amount of water they can use and guidelines on how to discharge waste water.

"If one of the companies was not regulated, there would be conflict. We give permits to ensure each has access to water," Orijabo says.

The permit also enables the ministry to deal with public health issues through waste management and control of pollution.

"We also control over exploitation of water resources and through our technical assessment, we can tell you how much you can abstract. If you removed so much in the next few years, you may drain the area, which is dangerous to the environment," Orijabo says.

The permit also provides legal security for water users.

"If we issued you the water permit, we protect your interest before another user is considered. Permits also help the ministry to gather information on water consumption. The permit is issued with a condition indicating the amount of water one can withdraw from the resource.

"The ministry does impromptu checks to make sure there is compliance. At the moment, we are doing a lot of sensitisation on the importance of using water sustainably and people are responding," Orijabo says. "People are realising that they need to secure their legal water usage," he says.

Denis Byamukama, the director of the Association of Private Water Operators, says a water permit is a regulatory requirement that needs to be heeded.

"It is a regulatory requirement, not optional. It is illegal to abstract water without a permit."

How to get a water permit

According to a country report on Water Permit Systems, Policy Reforms and Implications for Equity in Uganda by Nicholas Kiggundu, applications for water permits at all levels are made through the DWRM

According to the report, a person who occupies or intends to occupy any land or wishes to construct, own, occupy or control any works on or adjacent to the land may apply to the director for a water permit.

An application referred to under sub-regulation shall be in a specified form, accompanied by a fee payable to the Consolidated Fund at the time of submitting the application forms.

The director shall, after receipt of any application with all approved information, refer such applications to any public authority designated by the committee for consideration and comments. The director may grant a water permit in the forms specified after considering all factors and regulations regarding the issuance.

The eligibility of regulated water use is determined based on the definitions described in the Water Act 152. The majority of regulated water users are municipal and town councils, industrial, commercial or large-scale public utilities facilities, according to DWRM, 2010.

The DWRM requires that water abstraction and waste discharge is done under a permit that contains the terms and conditions.

Water permits are issued for periods not exceeding five years, with standard and site specific conditions and these must be strictly adhered to by the permit holder. Annual fees for use of water resources and discharge of wastewater have to be paid.