



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Acid mine drainage real threat to mine-impacted communities

Johannesburg, Tuesday 29 August 2017

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Acid mine drainage (AMD), the result of over a century of abusive mining practice, has become a real threat to the wellbeing of residents of townships adjacent to mining activities in Gauteng, the Bench Marks Foundation says in its latest publication, released today.

“Waiting to inhale”, a study on household health and wellbeing in four mine-impacted communities in Johannesburg, is the twelfth in Bench Marks’ Policy Gap series. The communities studied were Riverlea, Diepkloof, Meadowlands and Doornkop, all of which lie in the shadow of one of the most intensely mined areas on the planet.

AMD is produced during the mining process when large quantities of rock containing sulphide minerals are excavated from an open pit or exposed in an underground mine, and react with water and oxygen to create sulphuric acid.

The acid will leach from the rock until the sulphides and pyrites are leached out, a process that can last thousands of years. The acid is carried off the mine site by rainwater or surface draining and deposited into nearby streams, rivers, lakes and groundwater.

“AMD severely degrades water quality, can kill aquatic life, and make water virtually unusable,” Bench Marks says.

Bench Marks says that its research has shown that, regardless of whether Gauteng’s mines are active, ownerless, derelict or abandoned, the resulting AMD threatens communities, farmers and water consumers who bear the brunt of its effects downstream.

The organisation has called on government to address the problems posed by AMD by recording and cleaning up existing acid-generating mine sites, as well as taking action to prevent the future loss of aquatic habitat to AMD.

Public access to information on monitoring and enforcing AMD treatment and reclamation needs to be improved, says Bench Marks, and future AMD must be prevented by improving environmental risk assessment.

“A liability prevention approach to future AMD mine assessments should be adopted,” it added.

The Bench Marks research found that there had been frequent breaches of the tailing facilities of Durban Roodepoort Deep/ERGO, a gold producing company specialising in the re-mining of gold tailings or slimes dams. The community of Riverlea lives in the shadow of the Mooifontein tailings dump onto which DRD is depositing reworked tailings from other dumps in the area.

Breaches of tailings evaporation and holding ponds cause spills into the Booyens River, resulting in extremely high reading levels of total dissolved solids (TDS) and acidity. In one such reading, the TDS measurement was 3240ppm – way in excess of the United States’ Environmental Protection Agency upper limit for TDS of 500ppm.

A photograph taken by researchers in May 2015 showed the contents of a burst mine pipe containing water from a tailings dam that was spilling into the river. The pipe remained in a state of disrepair for 10 days.

Bench Marks noted that a breach of spillage controls dams resulted in 600 tonnes of slime flowing into the Russell stream. In the company's annual report of 2010, it was reported that an act of vandalism had resulted in the spillage of 1 500 tonnes of slime, while 16 environmental incidents were reported in 2011.

The Bench Marks research also noted that DRD **seemingly** operates without a water licence, probably because it has a province-wide mining licence instead of having separate licences for each of its operations.

ENDS

Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups; and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 by the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka who chairs the organisation and by member churches of the SACC.

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