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SAWS commemorates World Meteorological Day 2023 following an eventful weather year in South Africa

The South African Weather Service (SAWS)—an entity of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE)—today joins the global community in commemorating World Meteorological Day (World Met Day).

World Met Day is observed annually on 23 March to remember the coming into effect of the Convention establishing the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) on the same day in 1950, with a view to showcasing the essential contribution of National Meteorological and Hydrological Services such as SAWS to the safety and wellbeing of society.

The WMO, a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN) concerned with international cooperation and coordination on the state and behaviour of the earth's atmosphere, its interaction with the land and oceans, the weather and climate it produces, and the resulting distribution of water resources, selected, for the 2023 World Met Day commemoration, the theme: "The Future of Weather, Climate and Water across Generations."

This year's World Met Day commemoration follows a twelve-month period during which South Africa and the Southern African region at large have experienced several severe weather events which led to the loss of life and property, and above all else, shone a spotlight on the effect of climate change in relation to weather variability as well as humanity's vulnerability to severe weather.

Ahead of the 2022/23 summer season, SAWS accurately forecast above-normal rainfall. On 11 and 12 April 2022, the country found itself in the throes of one of the biggest severe weather events, when extreme rainfall associated with Tropical Cyclone Isa devastated parts of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, resulting in unprecedented flooding, and mudslides, which, in turn led to extensive infrastructure damage and the unfortunate loss of life.

Following that disaster, another severe weather event, caused by a cut-off low pressure system, took place on 21 and 22 May 2022 in KwaZulu-Natal. During that event, up to 200mm of rainfall occurred along

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the central and southern coast of the province. This exacerbated the damage that resulted from the earlier disaster.

Consistent with the predictions from the seasonal forecasts issued earlier in the year, the winter-rainfall areas experienced below-normal rainfall. Despite this, some significant winter weather systems occurred, such as the rainfall event of 18 to 20 September 2022, which was associated with a steep upper-air trough and a ridging high-pressure system, resulting in widespread showers and rain over the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

The third quarter of 2022/23 heralded the start of the rainy season for the summer rainfall parts of the country, with above-normal rainfall experienced over most areas as had been predicted by the seasonal forecast. Many events of severe thunderstorms were experienced throughout most of the country, including the Western Cape, where these events occur rarely.

The fourth quarter of 2022/23 saw no less than four cut-off lows and two tropical cyclones affecting the country and/or the region. Of great significance was tropical cyclone Freddy, which made its way from the North Australian coastal waters and eventually became a record-breaking system—the longest-lasting tropical cyclone. Although Freddy did not affect South Africa, the same cannot be said about the neighbouring Madagascar, Mozambique and Malawi, which suffered tremendous losses, both in terms of lives lost and damage to property, due to this system.

SAWS Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Ishaam Abader, said the entity will continue to strive to carry out impact-based forecasts and issue early warnings, in order to trigger early action, with a view to saving lives and property. It was of crucial importance, Mr Abader explained, for every person in the country to be covered by an early warning system by the year 2027, in line with the UN's Early Warnings for All (EW4ALL) initiative.

“Relying on data gathered through our 12 meteorological RADAR systems, more than 243 automatic weather stations, 1050 rainfall stations, 153 automatic rainfall stations, 11 upper-air soundings stations, 24 lightning detection sensors and 12 solar radiation stations, as well as satellite information, among other observational tools, SAWS will continue to work closely with its stakeholders, including Disaster Management Authorities, humanitarian aid Non-Governmental Organisations, and the mass media to cushion communities from the effects of harsh weather conditions, while supporting key socioeconomic sectors including agriculture, energy, water resources and health,” he said.

END

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