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South African Weather Service commemorates World Meteorological Day

The South African Weather Service (SAWS) today joins the rest of the world in commemorating the World Meteorological Day (WMD). On this day in 1950, the United Nations (UN) Convention establishing the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) came into force.

The WMO is a specialised agency of the UN for meteorology (weather and climate), operational hydrology and related geophysical sciences. Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, it has a membership of 193 countries and territories, including South Africa.

It is at the frontline of climate action as a leading UN agency, providing authoritative data and knowledge on weather, climate and water, informing adaptation measures through initiatives such as “Early Warnings for All”, and contributing to mitigation efforts through initiatives such as the Global Greenhouse Gas Watch.

The theme for WMD 2024 is ***"At the Frontline of Climate Action"***. It links with WMO's Sustainable Development Goal 13 to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.”

Meteorological work is of huge societal importance towards reducing hunger and poverty; improving health and well-being; ensuring clean water and affordable and clean energy;

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protecting life below the water and life on land; and making our cities and communities more resilient to climate change.

Weather and climate predictions help boost food production and by integrating epidemiology and climate information, helps us to understand and manage diseases sensitive to climate. Furthermore, early warning systems help to reduce poverty by giving people a chance to prepare for and limit the impact of extreme weather.

According to WMO, every year since the 1980s has been warmer than the previous year. The year 2023 was the hottest on record, with global average temperatures at approximately 1,45°C above the 1850-1900 average. This is largely due to a combination of human-induced climate change (such as excessive greenhouse gases being released in the atmosphere) as well as periods of El Niño (warming of the Pacific Ocean starting at the Peru coast and which is normally associated with drought and less rainfall in Africa). While El Niño occurs naturally, it plays a big role in contributing to the warming of the planet.

With rising temperatures comes extreme weather events such as heat waves, floods, droughts, wildfires and rapidly intensifying tropical cyclones, record high ocean heat and acidification of the oceans, affecting food sources on land and in the oceans. These conditions are being experienced in South Africa, threatening people's lives and livelihoods.

The demand for weather, climate and water forecast information has never been higher and is expected to increase in the coming years, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declaring that it is "now or never" to take drastic climate action.

According to SAWS climate scientists, studies have observed an increase in minimum and maximum temperatures in South Africa. This has come with threats to lives and livelihoods in the country. In January 2022, there were reports of heatstroke-related deaths of seven farmworkers in the Northern Cape following a heatwave, with temperatures reaching 41 Degrees Celsius over a wide area.

To support the quest for climate action, the power of super computers, satellite and remote sensing technology as well as smart mobile devices and artificial intelligence is harnessed by the WMO community as the demand for weather, climate and water information is expected to continue to grow in the coming years.

While the state of the global climate is currently a reason for concern, the global meteorological community has not despaired as several measures that have been implemented over the years are bearing fruit. These include the Convention on the Protection of the Ozone layer and its phasing out of substances that deplete the ozone layer; the rapid uptake the world over of renewable energy to replace fossil fuels that add to global warming; several opportunities to reduce emissions in cities and other measures as well as measures relating to the Dubai Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) during its 28th Conference of the Parties which will transition away from fossil fuels and triple renewable energy and climate funds for the most vulnerable.

The SAWS will continue to support the goals of the WMO to be at the frontline of climate action, thereby investing in the climate future of our children and theirs to come. By investing in state-of-the art equipment and participating in WMO initiatives such as “Early Warnings for All”, we want to bring the message to each South African citizen. For World Meteorological Day 2024 we have also partnered with the WMO, UNDP and the SABC to emphasise the reality of climate change and global warming, and the expected consequences, should action not be taken now.

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