

We have applied for retrospective environmental impact assessment application for the rectification of illegal activity

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A 75-year-old Clairwood woman received a R3million metro bill from the eThekweni Municipality's revenue department - and a demand to pay it within 14 days. | IOL



RIFT

Roman's Pizza in whey saga

Farmers in southern Drakensberg complain disposal of 'waste' from cheese-making process damaging ecology

FRED KOCKOTT and RS RAJU

A national pizza chain is caught up in a stink over the disposal of vast quantities of whey on farms in the southern Drakensberg in KwaZulu-Natal.

Whey is the wastewater by-product of making cheese. It is not toxic and can be used as livestock feed and fertiliser. But dumping it in large quantities can harm the environment.

Underberg Dairy began operating in March 2016 and is a bulk supplier of mozzarella, gouda and cheddar cheese and butter to the retail and restaurant industries, including popular pizza franchise Roman's Pizza.

The dairy buys on average 5 million litres of milk each month from 17 local farmers. From this it produces about 550 tons of cheese a month – and in the process, about 48 000 litres of whey a day.

What happens to this whey is now the subject of controversy.

According to a local dairy farmer who asked not to be named, large volumes have been dumped on various farms in the Franklin and Underberg area, disturbing the natural ecological balance in the area.

Responding, Underberg Dairy manager, Steve Roberts said this was utter nonsense. "No dumping has taken place. These stories are based on pure rumour and obfuscation.

"They come from petty people who are jealous of the success of the Underberg Dairy over such a short period of time."

Roberts said whey had been supplied "on request and free" to farmers to use as liquid fertiliser "until such time as we were advised that a licence was required, by the farmers individually, to use whey as a fertiliser".

It was used in accordance with methods used in the US, including restricted litres per hectare, as well as applications of lime and avoidance



THE 'spreading' of whey – waste water from cheese-making – on farms in the southern Drakensberg has come under the spotlight of environmental authorities. | Supplied

of proximity to water courses, added Roberts. He said a whey concentration plant had also been imported from Italy at a cost of about R5 million. He said concentrated whey was now trucked at the company's expense to pig farmers for consumption.

The concerns about the disposal of whey follow recent action taken against the dairy for contravening the National Environmental Management Act (Nema).

Documentation shows the original environmental authorisation for development of the Underberg Dairy allowed for the development of 4 200m² of agri-industrial infra-

structure. This included a factory and wastewater treatment infrastructure, an aeration dam, holding dams and a reed bed.

Amid growing demand, Underberg Dairy expanded its operations by more than 2 000m² than was allocated. As no environmental authorisation had been obtained, the expansion was deemed illegal. Directors of companies that contravene Nema risk a fine of up to R5m or up to 10 years in jail.

Independent environmental consultants have since been appointed by the dairy to make sure it becomes compliant.

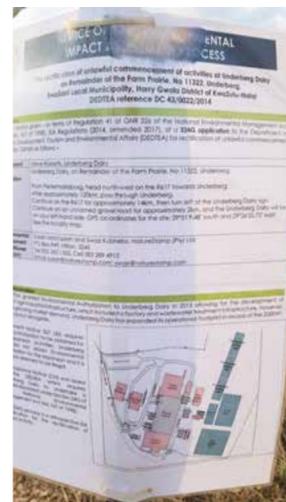
"We have applied for retrospective

environmental impact assessment application for the rectification of illegal activity," said Nature Stamp environmental consultant Susan Machpesh.

Recently appointed chief executive of Roman's Pizza Bonnie Cooper confirmed that Underberg Dairy was one of its suppliers.

She said it had been informed that the dairy was working with the authorities and "experts to investigate and resolve any alleged unlawful activities".

"We will accordingly await the outcome of the pending investigations and any resolutions thereto," said



NOTICE of rectification of unlawful activities at Underberg Dairy. | Supplied

Cooper. "Both Roman's Pizza (Pretoria) CC and Underberg Dairy (Pty) Ltd do not condone any illegal activities... We view these allegations and concerns of the farmer that lodged the complaint in a very serious light," she said.

Cooper said the dairy was a joint venture between Underberg farmers and the Nicolakakis family which also started Roman's Pizza.

She said in the past five years, Underberg Dairy had grown from an idea to a company that now employed about 245 people from the area.

Cooper, formerly chief marketing officer, succeeded John Nicolakakis in the Roman's Pizza hot seat.

SAFETY



ONE of the Metro Police's search and rescue vehicles.

New Metro Police unit waits for equipment

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THE members of the newly formed Metro Police's Search and Rescue Unit feel they have been "thrown into the deep end" as they wait to be provided with the necessary uniform and equipment to perform their duties.

The unit, made up of about 10 members, was established in November to support the SAPS Search and Rescue Unit, especially during disasters and festive seasons. The selected members underwent training and the city promised to provide the special equipment required to execute search and rescue.

However, officers said they had been waiting since last year to get equipment such as a toolkit, protective clothes and uniforms to perform their duties efficiently.

Officers who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals said some members had used their own money to buy equipment, while others had borrowed from their SAPS colleagues to carry out duties.

One said although they joined the unit voluntarily, it was demoralising to work under the conditions they were subjected to.

He said they had not been provided with even the basic requirements like wetsuits, Wellington boots and protective overalls.

"We feel like we were thrown into the deep end by the council considering the time that has past since this unit was formed. We have been waiting with hope; now we are worried that six months later, nothing has been done and we rely on the SAPS members.

"Not being provided with all the necessary equipment puts our lives at risk. We like our jobs and we want to help people, but the city is not coming to the party. We have bought the toolkit with our own money and our colleagues from SAPS have been good to us by lending us their equipment," the officer said.

Another high-ranking officer blamed the city's poor supply chain management.

"There was a budget for the list of equipment that we required. It was promised that by March everything will be delivered. We voluntarily chose to start working even though the equipment was not delivered. We hoped that it would be delivered in three months as was promised, but it's now six months. With the recent floods our services were much needed. We had to go out and help people. We have training and skills, we just need the support," he said.

The officer stressed that problems related to the provision of equipment and uniforms had been an ongoing problem within the metro police.

Metro Police spokesperson Senior Superintendent Parbhoo Sewpersad acknowledged the challenges faced by the unit, saying plans had been made to procure equipment.

"We understand that they have been on the ground doing a good job, but we must note that this unit has not been officially launched. We advised members to wait until we get all the equipment and uniforms before they start working, but they decided to bring their own and work with the SAPS.

"They work under their (SAPS) supervision and they have been providing them with equipment," he said.

"However, the procurement processes were at an advanced stage and the issue is likely to be resolved before the end of the month," said Sewpersad.

LAND

Farmers demand clarity over expropriation

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FARMERS in KwaZulu-Natal whose land has been earmarked for expropriation have lamented the slow pace of redistribution. They claim they are at risk of losing everything, having waited for more than 10 years.

Francois Rossouw, CEO of The Southern African Agri Initiative (Saai), said they have engaged legal experts to assist owners whose properties were listed in the Government Gazette by the land claims commissioner to prepare for possible court cases.

Rossouw said the process was taking too long to be finalised, which posed a risk to many farmers who rely on borrowed funding and investors.

"There was a sharp increase in the number of land claims listed in the Government Gazette. Landowners across the country are being served with the listings, and this leads to huge uncertainty and confusion, as well as a decline in investment and development on affected properties.

"In practice, however, the listing has a negative effect on the property market, as well as on property values in the affected areas. Since 2007, it has especially had a negative effect on the willingness of banks and other financial service providers in many areas to approve loans with the land as collateral security. Slower development also leads to a decline in job opportunities and economic growth," he said.

Rossouw said there was no reason

for panic regarding the listing of land claims. Several farmers in the KZN Midlands, where a significant percentage of the country's small-scale farmers are based, spoke of how the process has affected their production.

A farmer, Mark du Preez, said he once owned a flourishing 600-hectare farm in Weenen. He produced potatoes, soya and maize, employing 600 people. He said due to his farm being gazetted, he could no longer get loans from the bank because his farm was considered a risk. He said he was forced to stop farming, and all his employees lost their jobs, while the farm lies fallow.

Sandy La Marque, CEO of Kwanalu, KwaZulu-Natal agricultural union, agreed, saying no farming commun-

ity could survive the ongoing impact of an economic implosion due to restitution.

"Sadly, this is evidenced in many of the farming areas around the province. It must be understood that restitution is a rights-based process. While there were thousands of claims, the process has been fraught with challenges including lack of resources, under-budgeting, invalid claims and corruption.

Bheki Mbili, chief director of the Land Restitution Commission in KZN, acknowledged that the process was very slow, but said it was the nature of the business.

"The process of collecting information is crucial and long to ensure the land does not end in the wrong

hands," he said.

Mbili disputed that the delays were the cause of the decline in agricultural production. He said it was a personal decision for most farmers to stop investing in the farms once they were gazetted.

"Blaming the process is a political reaction view to land reform and restitution. Gazetting is the first step in terms of section 11 of the Restitution Act and does not mean the claim is valid.

"The land claims process was opened back in 1995. If the delays were really a case, we would have seen a sharp decline in agricultural production. Yes, there may be a decline, but I'm adamant it is not a result of the process," Mbili added.

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