

Stop the plunder

The minister of environment and tourism has stopped the plunder of endangered trees in northeastern Namibia, 15 months after a conservation organisation had raised the alarm.

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FALLEN GIANTS: All logging in the north and north-east is illegal. Photo: Catherine Sasman

Not a single environmental clearance certificate was ever issued for the felling and commercial trade of timber, which means that the large-scale felling of protected tree species is being done illegally, environment and tourism minister Pohamba Shifeta has revealed.

Shifeta said at a press briefing on Friday that only two or three environmental clearance certificates were issued to the ministry of agriculture, water and forestry: not for trade in trees, but for the clearing of land for crop production in the Zambezi Region. He said he had given instructions that all harvesting permits that had been issued must be withdrawn immediately. Shifeta said his ministry would require evidence that those permits were in fact withdrawn.

Shifeta also revealed that the environmental commissioner, Theo Nghitila, is working together with the police to impound any shipments of timber, especially in the Zambezi, Kavango East and Kavango West regions.

“I do not know if people do not understand. We will name and shame them,” said Shifeta of officials in the agriculture ministry who are issuing logging permits without environmental clearance.

He also said his ministry was considering putting a moratorium on tree harvesting “to do things properly and reorganise ourselves”.

“At the moment people are taking the timber away. Let us talk value addition here; we are currently creating jobs for other people,” Shitefa said.

He said the ministry was investigating the issuance of harvesting and transport licences for timber, but would not reveal any of the plans that are afoot.

This turn of events come after the agriculture ministry admitted that it had issued 161 harvesting permits to small-scale farmers in Kavango East, which led to a massive surge in the export of the harvested trees to China and raised serious concerns about deforestation.

The Namibian Chamber of Environment (NCE) has been trying to engage the agriculture ministry on the issue for about 15 months and has expressed serious concern about deforestation in the Zambezi and Kavango East regions.

Dr Chris Brown, CEO of the NCE, has written on several occasions to agriculture permanent secretary Percy Misika and forestry director Joseph Hailwa about the large-scale commercial deforestation and the unsustainable levels of timber extraction.

In early November Brown again wrote to Hailwa and said the forestry directorate seemed to be “totally outside of any public platform or any initiative to try and manage, prevent and reverse the situation”.

Brown said forestry staff “horrified” by the situation had contacted the NCE clandestinely for fear of raising the issue officially, adding that there seemed to be something “seriously wrong”.

In October the NCE said in a letter to Misiki that an immediate moratorium on all commercial woodland clearing and timber harvesting was needed.

It proposed to Misiki that an independent investigation and review of the performance, practices and modus operandi of the forestry sector be initiated, assessed against the forestry mission and objectives of the ministry. It also proposed an assessment of the state of Namibia's woodlands, with the focus on woodland loss over the last five years.

Brown said all attempts to engage the agriculture ministry were met with silence.

SAND MINING

Also on Friday, Shifeta reiterated that traditional authorities may only permit sand mining in communal areas if environmental clearance certificates have been issued.

The ministry had met with northern branches of the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI) earlier this month and it was agreed that illegal sand mining must stop.

The ministry also undertook not to unnecessarily delay the issuing of environmental clearance certificates.

Shitefa said all incidents of illegal sand mining would be investigated and the culprits would be prosecuted.

In terms of the Environmental Management Act, illegal mining can incur a fine of up to N\$500 000, or 25 years in prison, or both.

The police have been instructed to stop all sand mining done without environmental clearance certificates.

The meeting also agreed that no sand mining would be allowed in mahangu fields and no application for such would be considered.