

NWC MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Water is what the National Water Commission (NWC) is all about. It is its raw material and its end product. We collect, refine and distribute the purified commodity to industrial and domestic consumers over a hilly land area of 10,990 square kilometres. This is a huge and costly responsibility that must be carried out as the Commission seeks to provide potable water supply services for 2.6 million Jamaicans in addition to the collection, treatment and disposal of wastewater.

The NWC operates within the policy context of the Government of Jamaica's goal of universal access to potable water by the year 2005 and the establishment of sewerage systems in all major towns by 2020. This presents a serious challenge for the NWC because proper water supply and wastewater services are highly involved, complex, and costly, and become even graver when coupled with the difficulties in collecting revenue that limit the availability of funds for timely improvement, expansion and maintenance operations.

This responsibility is also a serious challenge because, despite Jamaica being blessed with excellent and relatively abundant water sources, the areas of high water demand are often far away from the required water resources. A community such as Mandeville, in Manchester, is one example of an area that is without a river source and therefore has to be supplied from water sources in Clarendon and St. Elizabeth. Similarly, Kingston and St. Andrew is provided with much of its water from St. Catherine and St. Thomas. Many water sources also do not provide a guaranteed year-round yield. Additionally, the often mountainous and rugged terrain over which water distribution systems have to operate presents significant challenges and saddles the Commission with very high electricity bills as electrical equipment is used to pump water to these hilly areas.

The inherited infrastructure with which the Commission has to work daily is well known to be aged and some below the desired standard. While significant investment continues to be made, it will take some time before this entire infrastructure is overhauled. Repair and maintenance of the water supply systems, as well as the treatment of water from rivers, springs and wells, also pose a financial challenge and is made worse by acts of vandalism, tampering, theft and increased costs associated with treating excessively polluted water sources.

Water is often taken for granted. For many people, water comes from a tap and is viewed as an ever abundant and renewable resource. However, water resources are finite and are threatened by poor land management, and improper agricultural and industrial practices. In addition, there is the threat

of pollution of underground and surface water supplies from improper disposal of sewage and other waste in rivers and streams.

Environmental protection is therefore an undeniable part of the NWC's mandate. An unprotected environment poses a serious threat to our water resources. Consequently, the NWC and other stakeholders have become involved in a number of activities to improve water management practices in order to ensure a high quality of water and to contribute to improved health for Jamaicans as well as the sustainable growth and environmental development of the country.

Rapidly changing population growth trends and increasing numbers of unplanned developments in various pockets across the country also mean that both water supply and sewerage infrastructure often have to play "catch-up" with service demands. In addition, the NWC is sometimes saddled with the responsibility and cost of installing infrastructure and initiating service delivery in areas and communities, which would normally be the function of a developer before the area is populated.

As cities grow, so do their water needs, often requiring additional sources of water. New sources of water have to be found further away from urban centres, particularly if there has been contamination from industry and waste sanitation systems. In rural areas, contamination from intensive animal rearing, fertilizers and pesticides, also threatens Jamaica's groundwater.

These challenges provide the circumstances that demand the best out of the Commission and its employees. The NWC is acutely aware that the service it provides is not merely a desirable amenity but a commodity and service essential to growth, development and life itself. Consequently, the goals of providing potable water to within easy access of all Jamaicans and improving the wastewater collection, treatment and disposal in all major towns are twin objectives to which the NWC is resolutely committed.

Despite the many challenges, the NWC recognises that water is essential for national development and has undertaken a number of projects to continue its drive to bring water to more communities and improve service in existing areas. These projects include the development of new water supply and wastewater treatment plants islandwide as well as the rehabilitation and upgrading of existing facilities. The NWC's infrastructure expansion now facilitates water supply systems that pump water over rugged and wooded terrain, to numerous hilly and low-lying towns and districts, which previously had no piped water service.