

Bitumen shortage hurts road builders

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Bitumen, which is mainly used to make asphalt for tarred roads, is in short supply in South Africa, putting pressure on the South African National Roads Agency's (Sanral's) multibillion-rand road upgrade and building plans.



It is also making it tougher for companies that work with the parastatal to make profits.

The lack of bitumen was reiterated at a media roundtable held by the South African Petroleum Industry Association (Sapia) on Monday (4 February).

Sapia's chairman and chief executive of Total South Africa, Christian des Closieres, said Sapia had not yet worked out a way of making, or importing, bitumen on a timely and reliable basis and, as a result, construction companies would continue to see supplies being volatile.

"It is true that bitumen has been a bit of a problem. Companies lacked budget to import it last year. However, demand actually tapered off from the middle of last year when the industry was struggling to get the material," he said.

Last year, some construction projects were delayed because bitumen, which is a hydrocarbon by-product from heavy crude oil, had to be imported. Planned and unplanned refinery shutdowns, especially overseas, made the timing of imports more difficult.

Projects affected in Cape Town included the MyCiTi Integrated Rapid Transit feeder bus-stop contracts. The city imported 4,500 tons of bitumen from Malaysia in May last year, said the mayoral committee member for transport, roads and stormwater, Brett Herron.

Sapia executive director Avhaphani Tshifularo said to store bitumen is difficult as it requires special facilities.

"It is difficult to match the supply and demand of bitumen, but we are looking at strategies to make it easier to get the building material in South Africa," Tshifularo said.

Des Closieres PetroSA planned to build a new oil refinery in the Eastern Cape this year, which would make South Africa less reliant on bitumen imports.

Transport Minister Ben Martins said small-scale projects such as pothole repairs were put on hold nationwide to focus on bigger projects, such as the Gauteng Freeway Improvement Project.

"We have had to shift resources to the bigger projects," he said.

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