

# Lesotho Highlands Water Project contractor suspended for polluting rivers

1,400 workers sent home as work on 38km tunnel stalls.

By [Sechaba Mkhethi](#) 13 May 2025



Work has been suspended on the 38km tunnel between the Polihali and Katse dams. Photo: Lesotho Highlands Development Authority (fair use).

- Kopano Ke Matla Joint Venture, responsible for building a 38-km tunnel connecting two dams in the Lesotho highlands, has had to suspend operations.
- Inspections revealed that the company's wastewater treatment plants are non-compliant.
- Oily and acidic wastewater has been dumped into rivers relied on by rural communities, and into the Katse reservoir which provides drinking water to South Africa.
- The company has until 26 May to resolve the issues. Meanwhile, 1,400 workers have been sent home.

A construction company working on Phase II of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP) has been forced to suspend operations because it has been dumping acidic and oily wastewater into nearby rivers and the Katse reservoir.

The Katse reservoir provides drinking water to South Africa.

After receiving a suspension letter, the company, Kopano Ke Matla Joint Venture, "indefinitely" sent home 1,400 workers for the [M42-billion](#) (M1.00 = R1.00) binational project between Lesotho and South Africa.

Kopano Ke Matla is a [joint venture](#) between Chinese-owned companies Yellow River Company and Sinohydro Bureau 3 and South African company Unik Civil Engineering.



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The company is responsible for constructing a M7.68-billion, 38km transfer tunnel connecting the under-construction Polihali Dam to the existing Katse Dam. This will add 2,325-million cubic meters of [storage capacity](#) to the water scheme, increasing the amount of water the scheme provides annually from 780-million cubic meters to 1,270-million cubic meters.

Chief Masiphole Sekonyela of Tloha-re-buoe village near the under-construction Polihali Dam told *GroundUp* that the contractor's wastewater discharge has directly impacted his community.

Wastewater removed from under-construction tunnels was dumped into the Sekoai River near the village, said Sekonyela. He described the wastewater as oily and "black like sewage".

"We now don't know where to take our animals to drink. Women used to do laundry at the Sekoai River, but the water is now contaminated," Sekonyela said.

"We have seen the contamination ourselves. The company has not even bothered to warn the community that they have a problem with the water," he added.

Mpho Brown, spokesperson for the Lesotho Highlands Development Authority, told *GroundUp* that the company has until 26 May to rectify the environmental non-compliance issues. Brown said that the suspension is not expected to affect the overall progress on the project.



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The deadline for Phase II was [previously moved](#) from 2027 to 2029. Delays were due to a combination of factors, including protracted negotiations with Lesotho, changes in leadership within the South African Department of Water and Sanitation, and allegations of political interference and potential corruption.

An internal memo, seen by *GroundUp*, from the office of the project director at Kopano Ke Matla states that staff will be laid off indefinitely, "until the engineer formally lifts the suspension ... during this period, the principle of no work, no pay will apply."

In a suspension letter dated 5 May, seen by *GroundUp*, the supervising engineers cited Kopano Ke Matla continued non-compliance with wastewater treatment specifications, "despite multiple correspondences and discussions in this regard, including more recent warnings of pending suspensions."

The letter instructed Kopano Ke Matla to suspend all work associated with the non-compliant wastewater discharge systems. The consultants had inspected the company's five wastewater treatment plants on 5 May and found that the systems remained non-compliant.

The suspension letter also reveals that Kopano Ke Matla had addressed only three of the 26 issues flagged as non-compliant. The company had failed to provide its effluent test results and the sulphuric acid dosing

pump was malfunctioning, resulting in high pH levels of the treated water and evidence of hydrocarbon (oil) contamination of the treated water.



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The documents attached to the suspension letter, seen by *GroundUp*, highlighted other concerns, including

- discharge of untreated construction wastewater into the Ntšupe River,
- overflow from the peracetic acid settlement pond
- discharge of chemical toilet waste outside the project site,
- discharge of untreated tunnel effluent into the Katse Reservoir (a source of drinking water for South Africa),
- lack of construction wastewater method statements,
- inadequate water quality monitoring equipment, and
- failure to maintain sewage and water treatment plants.

The letter also accuses Kopano Ke Matla of failing to submit a method statement for managing construction wastewater for review. This document should outline how wastewater generated during construction activities will be managed, treated, and disposed of safely to meet environmental and legal standards.

Representatives for Kopano Ke Matla did not respond to *GroundUp*'s questions by the time of publication

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