

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Combining data will reduce risk to infrastructure

WITH THE SUMMER RAIN SEASON AROUND the corner, the spectre of damaging floods looms. But a new coalition between short-term insurer Santam, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), and the University of Cape Town's African Centre for Climate and Earth Systems Science (ACCESS) aims to reduce risk-causing behaviour and its negative impact on the environment.

The partners aim to collect data that local government can use on an ongoing basis to develop better land use and disaster management policies.

Most importantly, local government can begin to formulate municipal by-laws aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change.

CSIR coasts and oceans competence area manager and ACCESS manager Dr Neville Sweijd, said they ultimately want to provide real-time forecasts of ocean conditions, which will be translated into a wide range of products for different users. "Nothing occurs in isolation," said Dr

Sweijd. "What happens in the sea affects what happens in the atmosphere, which affects what happens on the land."

With all the data "in one basket", there will be a better understanding of the natural dynamics that affect the risk to infrastructure, he explained.

"The Integrated Coastal Management Act, which came into effect last year, requires that government at all tiers embark on planning processes.

"The issue of capacity at municipal level also needs to be addressed."

They will provide information in a format amenable for use in these planning processes, added Dr Sweijd.

Johan van den Berg, Santam Agriculture specialised crop insurance manager, said the coalition would help the public and private sectors develop practical regulatory mechanisms.

"The positive spinoff from this is that risk is being managed on the basis of research and this will ultimately

benefit communities," he said.

"This will save the state large sums of money spent on rehabilitating communities and the environment after a flood.

"For example, if people knew that it's risky to build in certain low-lying areas, the damage caused by floods would be prevented or mitigated and loss of life and damage to property limited."

The 2007 floods, which resulted in damages amounting to R3,6 billion along the KZN south coast, was partially a result of poor land use planning and ecosystem degradation, he added.

Some of the contributing factors to changes in the ecosystem are urban and coastal development, river canalisation, wetland destruction, rangeland overgrazing by livestock, and river system manipulation. – *Robyn Joubert*