What water stewardship can do for corporates

It appears that more has been said than done about meeting South Africa’s water challenges; with the 2030 timeframe for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) looming, the country needs a new urgency on its water stewardship responsibilities.

This is the view of SRK Consulting principal consultant Fiona Sutton, who has urged businesses to take a more proactive approach to achieving water sustainability in their operations and supply chains. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Unido) has forecast that global fresh water demand will be 6,900 km3 per year by 2030 – some 40% over the global sustainable fresh water supply of 4,200 km3 per year1- if current water practices continue.

“We are far from meeting the SDG water goals, which target the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all,” said Sutton. “Many companies highlight water issues in their policies, but do not seem to have taken the vital steps toward implementation of more sustainable practices.”

She highlighted the importance of raising awareness about what water stewardship really involves: using water in a way that is socially and culturally equitable, environmentally sustainable, and economically beneficial. This can best be achieved through a stakeholder-inclusive process that includes both site-based and catchment-based actions, she argued.

“With growing populations and economies, changing lifestyles and global climate change, there is increased pressure on our water resources,” she said. “The private sector, government and other players urgently need to play their part and collaborate to ensure shared water security.”

She noted how the Covid-19 pandemic had thrown water challenges into stark relief, with business facing increased risk as a result of insufficient water access in communities. “Many employees live in communities which are not adequately served with water services, making it difficult for them to adhere to good hygiene practices, collectively known as WASH – or water, sanitation and hygiene,” she said. “The pandemic has brought home the risks to business, as these employees may be more likely to become infected, thereby needing to take sick leave or worse still bringing the virus into the workplace.” The Covid-19 pandemic will pass but water challenges related to climate change and associated drought and flooding risks will be with us a lot longer.

To make practical progress on their water stewardship journey, Sutton urged the use of global best practice tools like the International Water Stewardship Standard from the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS).

“The AWS Standard offers a credible and globally-applicable framework for major water users to understand their own water use and impacts with practical guidance on how to effectively manage these impacts,” she said. “Part of the solution is for companies to work collaboratively and transparently with others, most importantly the local communities, for sustainable water management within the context of their wider water catchment.”

Practical steps and guidance in the AWS Standard help water users to improve their water practices for better on-site water performance, while also contributing to wider sustainability goals. She noted water crises are being exacerbated by climate change and are now acknowledged as societal risks due to their far-reaching consequences.

“According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report, environmental risks now make up four of the top five risks in terms of impact – in other words, the damage they can cause,” she said. “With water being so closely associated with environmental issues, this should send a warning to us.”

Sutton emphasised that the advantages of good water stewardship were substantial and included gaining efficiencies that allowed corporate initiatives to pay for themselves over time. As a trained AWS water steward, she is equipped to help clients achieve AWS certification and to improve corporate systems. By incorporating local stakeholders in these initiatives the knock on effects of good water stewardship will benefit society as a whole and can contribute to corporate’s ratings on environment, social and governance (ESG) criteria.

“The journey starts with an understanding of the business’s water dependencies and impacts and develops to allow the mitigation of operational and supply chain water risks,” she said. “Taking effective steps in this direction gives businesses a competitive advantage and boosts their brand value – while assuring investors that the enterprise is viable for the long term.”

By building relationships with local water-related stakeholders, companies can enhance the positive impact of their initiatives and also help address challenges shared by others in the catchment, said Sutton.