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Treading Carefully On N2 Contract To Preserve Mangrove Forests

In one of the largest permit applications to go through the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) in recent years, Concor Infrastructure has worked with specialist consultants to reduce its environmental footprint on the N2 national freeway contract north of Mtunzini in KwaZulu-Natal province.

Concor Infrastructure, formerly Murray & Roberts Infrastructure, was acquired by a consortium led by the Southern Palace Group and is a Level 1 B-BBEE contributor.

According to Concor Infrastructure project manager Jonathan Pearce, the expansion of the N2 roadway was going to affect a number of ecologically sensitive areas, especially mangrove swamp forests, which are an endangered ecosystem.

“In line with our ‘Zero Harm’ policy in all aspects of our business, including the natural environment, Concor Infrastructure wanted to ensure not just that the project was compliant in terms of legal regulations, but that we could meet our own critical environmental standards,” says Pearce.

Working with KZN-based environmental consultancy Enviropro, Concor Infrastructure was able to make a number of adjustments to its plans, further mitigating the impact of construction on the sensitive areas alongside the highway.

“Concor Infrastructure was able to reduce the construction footprint as the road went through the larger forest sections,” says Enviropro managing director Iain Jourdan. “Through the careful adjustment of plans, the portion of the forest affected was reduced substantially – meaning that fewer trees had to be removed and relocated.”

The work was conducted on the basis of a large scale permit application to the DAFF. This was followed by extensive discussions on the optimal off-set plans on how the client, South African National Roads

Agency SOC Limited (SANRAL), could recreate swamp forest areas in other suitable locations with enough water and with a similar environment.

Collaborating with Enviropo was KZN vegetation expert David Styles, who was instrumental in compiling the classification report detailing the various species and areas to be accommodated in the permit application.

Protected vegetation – which was marked with black-and-yellow danger tape for the benefit of contractors working on the route – was found to fall in three main categories: forest communities, protected under the National Forests Act; particular species, also protected by this Act; and species protected by the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Conservation Ordinance.

The forests affected by the construction included the riverine woodland forest, dominated by the Acacia Robusta or Splendid Thorn, and the true mangrove Bruguiera Gymnorhiza or Black Mangrove within the water's edge; the swamp forest, dominated by the Barringtonia Racemosa or Powderpuff tree; and the seral dryland forest, also referred to as the Northern Coastal Forest.

Among the other areas containing protected species were large numbers of plants protected by the provincial conservation ordinance. This included over 1 000 plants of the bulb Drimiopsis Maculate and about 18 examples of all sizes of the bulb Scadoxus Puniceus. Plants protected by the ordinance cannot be damaged, destroyed or relocated without permit authorisation from the provincial conservation authority, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife.

The consultant recommended that some of the impact could be reduced by making the construction and disturbance footprint as narrow as possible. Concor Infrastructure's adjustments to the construction plan therefore made operations at these sections narrower than elsewhere along the route. While the size, numbers and specialist habitat requirements of the protected trees made them difficult to move, the smaller herbaceous plants could be relocated.

"Jonathan and his team were superb in how they accommodated the environmental sensitivity of the key areas of forest and swamps affected by the road contract," says Jourdan. "They put forward various innovative suggestions on how the construction plan could be adapted to reduce the amount of

vegetation clearing necessary. This reduced the environmental impact while facilitating the progress of the contract.”

ENVIRO PIC 01 : Concor Infrastructure constructed a causeway on the uMhlalazi River.

ENVIRO PIC 02 : The N2 highway runs close to natural forests.

ENVIRO PIC 03 : A view of the northbound N2 showing a carefully positioned access road.

ENVIRO PIC 04 : One of the mangrove swamp areas adjacent to construction works.

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