EMS FOUNDATION: PUBLIC STATEMENT

Axing of Minister Dion George: the Democratic Alliance Shows Its True Colours

"*Environmental protection and the rule of law must walk hand in hand, justice for the people and justice for the planet. Our country is rich in biodiversity, but that richness has made us a target. Along our coasts, abalone poaching has become a global criminal enterprise. It strips our oceans bare and destroys the livelihoods of coastal communities. In our parks, rhino horn and ivory trafficking continues to fuel violence and corruption. Across our veld, captive-bred lions are raised for commercial hunting, reducing living creatures to commodities. These are not legacies worth defending. They are systems that must end*."

These are the words of Dr Dion George, the former Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment, representing South Africa at the Rio Declaration on Crimes that Affect the Environment which was endorsed by eighteen governments, international environmental and civil society organisations in Brazil on the 4th November 2025.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa fired Dr Dion George as Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, the official explanation was carefully scripted: "under-performance." But the timing, the political choreography and the beneficiaries tell a far more revealing story — one that exposes the growing influence of wildlife-breeding and trophy-hunting lobbies inside government. George's removal was not simply a cabinet reshuffle. It was a political execution. And South Africa's wild life will pay the price.

When Dr Dion George took over from Barbara Creecy, he did not retreat from her bold and much needed environmental reforms; he deepened them. He embraced the High-Level Panel recommendations, which called for the end of captive lion breeding, the phasing out of intensive rhino farming, and a shift toward ethical, ecologically sound conservation. He:

- Moved to shut down the captive-lion industry, pushing forward with the voluntary exit programme.

- Set the lion-bone export quota at zero for 2025, effectively ending commercial trade in lion skeletons.
- Confirmed South Africa would not back any attempt to reopen international trade in rhino horn or ivory.
- Refused to issue trophy-hunting quotas for elephant, black rhino and leopard while a court case challenged the quota process.
- Defended animal-wellbeing provisions in NEMBA.
- Appealed the Kimberley High Court ruling that opened the door for exporting rhino horn from privately owned breeding facilities.

And that made Minister George dangerous — not to the public, not to conservation, but to powerful private interests who have long treated wildlife as inventory.

- For years, South Africa's predator-breeding, "game" ranching and trophy hunting sectors have worked to influence wildlife policy. Their goal is simple: derail reforms that restrict commercial exploitation. WRSA, SAPA, and SUCo-SA all had open conflicts with the DFFE under Ministers George and Creecy. They fought:
- the shutdown of the lion-bone industry;
- the phasing out of intensive rhino farming;
- animal-wellbeing clauses they claim threaten "sustainable use,";
- court rulings blocking lion-bone exports; and
- suspended trophy-hunting quotas.

When the Democratic Alliance became part of the interim government, its leader John Steenhuisen — previously Chief Whip, then Agriculture Minister — walked straight into the arms of the wildlife-breeding sector. Steenhuisen appeared visibly out of his depth in a portfolio dominated by complex legal and scientific issues. Observers say he relied heavily on DA figure Willie Aucamp, who enjoys significant rapport with wildlife ranchers and breeders. By early 2025, Steenhuisen was openly championing the industry:

- At HuntEx in February, standing beside WRSA CEO Richard York, he declared: "Hunting is conservation."
- By June, Aucamp was frequently seen with high-value game breeders like Colin Engelbrecht, who run predator-breeding facilities.
- By September, the DA's courting of the sector was open and unapologetic. What began as proximity became alignment. What became alignment soon looked like capture.

Minister George's sacking raises urgent questions:

- Will Aucamp withdraw the state's appeal in the rhino-horn case?
- Will the lion-bone export quota be restored?
- Will the captive lion industry gain new life?
- Will trophy-hunting quotas be rushed through?
- Will animal-wellbeing protections be gutted?

The EMS Foundation also notes the various likely disinformation campaigns designed to lay a clear path for Willie Aucamp and the sector he represents, by attempting to bring Dr Dion George's integrity into disrepute using targeted tactics to manipulate public opinion, erode trust and create a negative narrative. This method to manipulate information was used during the Apartheid regime to discredit opponents and justify its racially oppressive policies.

At the same time, we are also paying close attention to the pro trophy hunting rhetoric which pushes a flawed narrative that that hunting is a big money spinner. The EMS Foundation undertook an independent technical review of these figures which highlights several methodological weaknesses that bring the hunters narrative into question.

With the sanction of President Ramaphosa, the Democratic Alliance has not only shown its anti-environment true colours, but it has created a perfect storm of an ideologically compromised new Minister within a Department that has a long history of one-sided engagement with extractive industries, a largely untransformed mindset which views wild life as commodities, and some individuals in the department that are likely either motivated by money or stuck in apartheid legacy thinking. This is what both former Ministers, Creecy and George, were up against. It is therefore hugely ironic, given our history of State Capture and the fact that we are living in the Sixth Extinction where wild animals are facing growing extirpation, that both the ANC and the DA appear to be pushing this dangerous agenda.

As a consequence, South Africa is facing massive reputational damage. The battle for South Africa's wild life, its lions, rhinos and elephants has entered a new, volatile phase. Dion George may have fallen — but the fight for the soul of South African conservation is only beginning. We are at a crossroads, but be warned: civil society will not take this lying down.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Official Policy Position on the Management, Breeding, Hunting and Trade of Iconic Species – Minister Creecy and Minister George

Dr Dion George was appointed as Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment from the 3rd July 2024 until 12th November 2025. His career spans over decades during which time he has been a strong champion for transparent governance and economic growth.

Dr Dion George assumed this role as part of the new Government of National Unity cabinet appointments following the general election, he succeeded Barbara Creecy, a veteran of the African National Congress and member of the ANC's National Executive. Importantly, Dr Dion George built on the policy foundations established by his predecessor, publicly pledging to continue the good work of Barbara Creecy's tenure.

In 2019 Minister Barbara Creecy appointed a high-level panel of experts to address significant public concern and international reputational damage caused by South Africa's policies, legislation and practises related to, amongst other, the captive lion breeding industry and associated lion bone trade.

After an exhaustive process this panel recommended the phasing out of the intensive management and captive breeding of rhinoceros. The panel also recommended that South Africa does not breed lions in captivity, keep lions in captivity or use captive lions or their derivatives commercially.
The core objective of these recommendations was to prioritize the conservation of wild, free-ranging populations of lion and rhino and transition away from practises that may not demonstrably benefit overall conservation efforts.

On the 28th March 2024, Cabinet approved the revised Policy Position on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Elephant, Lion, Leopard and Rhinoceros for implementation. Consistent with the policy context of the white paper, this policy position focuses primarily on correcting unsustainable practices, such as the captive lion industry, promoting conservation, which included the recommendation to phase out intensive management and captive breeding of rhinoceros for commercial purposes and enhance wild populations.

Cabinet Approved Policy Position - Dissolving the Captive Lion Industry and the Lion Bone Quota
In December 2022 Minister Creecy appointed a Ministerial Task Team to identify and recommend voluntary exit and pathways from the captive lion industry. Recommendations dated on the 15th February 2024 were submitted to the Minister and a Report was released. The minister re-appointed some of the Ministerial Task Team members, to facilitate the implementation of the outcomes of the Report. The Terms of Reference were published under Government Notice No 4765, Government Gazette No. 50574 of 26th April 2024.

The Report recommended voluntary exit options from the captive lion industry, including options involving lion bone stockpiles and derivatives. Parties to the voluntary exit programme were required to apply for the necessary Threatened and Protected Species (TOPS) permits.

Minister Dion George invited South Africans who wished to consider the voluntary exit options involving lion bones and derivatives, to register their interest by submitting their details to the department.

On the 16th November 2024 Andrew de Blocq van Sheltinga, Democratic Alliance spokesperson for Forestry, Fisheries and Environment, issued a public statement confirming that the Democratic Alliance supports steps taken by Minister Dion George against the captive lion industry.

On the 14th July 2025 Minister Dion George confirmed that a prohibition notice outlawing the establishment of new captive lion facilities for commercial purposes was moving towards formal promulgation under the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (No. 10 of 2004), known as NEMBA."*We are committed to enforcing clear, effective, and legally robust measures that protect South Africa's natural heritage and address concerns raised by the public, conservation experts and stakeholders*," George said in a press statement. He added that his department intended to implement these reforms without delay. Steps to ensure would happen included engaging with provincial members of the Executive Council under Section 87A(3) of NEMBA.

On the 22nd September 2025 DFFE announced that it would not allow any legal exports of lion bones or derivatives effectively setting the quota at zero for the 2025 calendar year. The lion bone quota determines how many lion skeletons may be legally exported from South Africa in a given year. With the quota set at zero, no commercial exports will be permitted under law.

The intended zero export quota for trade in lion bones sourced from captive breeding operations in South Africa takes into account, amongst other the recommendations of the Portfolio Colloquium adopted by the National Assembly in 2018, recommendations of the High Level Panel on the captive lion industry in 2021 and the recommendations of the Ministerial Task Team Report on voluntary exit from the captive lion industry 2024. The intended zero export quota is informed by Government Policy on captive lion breeding as set out in the White Paper on the Conservation and Sustainable use of South Africa's Biodiversity 2023 and the Policy Position on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Elephant, Lion, Leopard and Rhinoceros 2024.

African Elephant, Black Rhinoceros and Leopard Hunting Quotas

On the 12th September 2025 Dr Dion George announced that he had decided not set the 2024-2025 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) export quotas for African Elephant, Black Rhinoceros and Leopard hunting trophies following the ongoing legal case brought by Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA), currently before the Gauteng High Court, which is challenging aspects of the quota setting process. The Minister's decision aims to protect the integrity of the process and ensure legal certainty while the matter is before the court.

CITES Rhino Horn and Ivory Trade

On the 30th October 2025 the DFFE confirmed South Africa's commitment to the international ban on commercial trade of both rhino horn and ivory. Minister Creecy's successor Dr Dion George stated that "South would not support any move to reopen the ivory or rhino horn trade. Our duty is to protect our wildlife not to profit from their destruction."

The Wildlife Industry Resists South Africa's Official Policy Position

The DFFE is facing several key legal challenges over important fundamental wildlife policies, including:

1. *South African Hunters and Game Conservation Association Legal Application to Set Aside Animal "Wellbeing" Provisions within NEM:BA*

   On the 20th November 2024 the NSPCA was made aware that the South African Hunters and Game Conservation Association (SAHGCA) had applied for direct access to the Constitutional Court to set aside provisions within NEM:BA regarding the wellbeing of animals.

   SAHGCA claims the state's failure to facilitate sufficient public engagement in the crafting of the National Environmental Management Laws Amendment (Nemla) Act 2 of 2022. SAHGCA wants certain provisions in the Act declared invalid and unconstitutional or suspended for a year pending more public discussion.

   SAHGCA says its objectives are to promote the interests of sport shooters, game farmers, nature conservations and professional hunters in South African and the definition of 'wellbeing' poses a threat to hunting. The EMS Foundation believes that striking out those provisions would mean that NEM:BA would be inconsistent with the Judgements of the Constitutional Court relating to wellbeing of animals with current wildlife policy. This means that South Africa's framework biodiversity Act would not include any requirement that animal wellbeing be considered in the management of biodiversity.

2. *South African Predators Association Legal Application to Reopen Controversial Lion Bone Industry*
   In 2019 a Gauteng Division of the High Court found an application by lion breeders to renew the lion bone export quota to be unlawful and constitutionally invalid. Eleven members of South African Predators Association (SAPA) filed a legal challenge in the Gauteng Division of the High Court in Pretoria in December 2024 to force the government to reinstate a lion bone quota. On 22nd September 2025 the DFFE announced it will not permit the quota of lion bones and derivatives and it set the lion bone quota at zero.

3. *WRSA Legal Application to Compel DFFE to Publish Annual Trophy Hunting Quotas for Elephant, Black Rhino and Leopard*
   In 2021 DFFE released its draft quotas for the three specific species on the 8th October 2021 with a 30-day comment period these quotas were too late to implement. In 2022 Humane Society International (Africa) won an interim interdict against DFFE preventing it from publishing and implementing quotas for 2022.

   The WRSA legal application is to compel the Minister to publish national hunting quotas for elephant, black rhinos and leopards and allocate these to SA's provinces. According to WRSA CEO Richard York "this means that South Africa has not had a legal framework for the hunting and export of trophies of these species since 2021. Some hunting of these species had taken place under provincial nature conservation authorities in Limpopo and Mpumalanga but they had to improvise for example by only issuing permits that don't allow for international trophy exports. These types of hunts are less lucrative than the international high value business that includes the export of trophies that South Africa has built its reputation on." York said that South Africa has a mandated CITES approved annual quota of: 150 elephants, or 300 tusks; 150 male leopards and 0.5% of the national black-rhino population.

4. *Rhino Breeders Derek Lewitton and Wicus Diedericks VS DFFE and others*
   The case brought by Derek Lewitton and Wicus Diedericks against the DFFE in the High Court in Kimberley where the Judge ruled that: "In circumstances where the Management Authority is satisfied that the rhino horn comes from a white rhinoceros that was bred in captivity for conservation purposes: the Management Authority shall, upon application, issue a permit/certificate to the effect. The Northern Cape Division of the High Court in Kimberley, on Friday, 31 October, ruled that rhino horn harvested from registered captive breeding operations can be exported for sale, as such facilities are devoted to conservation and not commerce. DFFE had said it will appeal the decision, the judicial process is therefore far from exhausted and could drag on for many months or even years.

The Democratic Alliance Party and Perceived Conflict Interest

State Capture has been a profoundly damaging period in South Africa's recent history and the nation is actively engaged in a complex process of recovery and reform. The impact was devastating, leading to the significant erosion of public trust.

The Public Service Commission Act clearly states that a "perceived conflict of interest" is where a public official is in a position that appears to be influenced by his/her private interests when doing his/her job."

If a public official has a private interest which influences, or appears to influence a public decision. The recent appointment of Minister Willie Aucamp to replace Minister Dion George is concerning. There is growing concern that his personal or family interests may benefit commercially from decisions that benefit game breeding and hunting. It has been suggested that this may even constitute corruption in terms of The Prevention and Combatting of Corrupt Activities Act (PRECCA) 12 of 2004.

Section 195 of the South African Constitution which sets out the basic values and principles that govern public administration. Services must be provided impartially; fairly; equitably and without bias.

Undermining the independence of key departments such as the Department of Agriculture or DFFE for private or factional gain and/or advancement will severely damage public trust and confidence in government and the political system as a whole".

In June 2025, EMS Foundation, raised concern about the ambiguous and contradictory messages created by the Democratic Alliance with regard to the highly contentious issue of the captive lion industry. Of deep concern was the fact that Mr Willie Aucamp, the National Spokesperson for the Democratic Alliance and Desiree van der Walt attended the Annual General Meeting of the Sustainable Use Coalition of South Africa (SuCO) at Mabalingwe in Limpopo in June 2025. This was not in their personal capacities. Willie Aucamp, stated in on his social media platform that he was privileged to address the Annual General Meeting of the Sustainable Use Coalition of South Africa (SUCo-SA) at Mabalingwe.

Bearing in mind that Richard York of the Professional Hunters Association of South Africa (PHASA) argued that "South Africa's conservation image is not being tarnished by the breeding or hunting of lions" at the Colloquium held in 2018 in Parliament. He unpacked key opportunities of captive breeding insofar as biodiversity conservation, economic development, social development and assistance with management are concerned.



Minister Steenhuisen and Richard York CEO of WRSA and Treasurer on Executive Committee SUCo and Colin Engelbrecht WRSA Chairman at Piet du Toit Game Auction 15th February 2025

Source: https://www.facebook.com/share/1BPzeqpzuV/?mibextid=wwXIfr

Minister Steenhuisen is a proud supporter of the hunting industry and game breeding industry in South Africa. Minister at HuntEx 2025: "*It's great to see the link between hunting, conservation and animal production in the country all of these industries have a huge synergy and it's wonderful to see a thriving sector in South Africa. Hunting is conservation the biggest conservationists in our country are hunters. I look forward as the agriculture minister wildlife ranching falls under my department and I look greatly forward to working with sector bodies like Richard York as well as all the hunting organisations to see how we can harness the economic opportunities for South Africa. Our natural environment is a unique selling propositions and harnessing that for our people is massively important. Shows like HuntEx demonstrate how wide and diverse this industry goes*."



19th October 2025
Colin Engelbrecht and Willie Aucamp and Richard York

Source: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1VFxd1S1LD/?mibextid=wwXIfr



Democratic Alliance Federal Council Chairperson Helen Zille photographed with Sarah Forsyth who represents the Wildlife Ranching South Africa on the Board of the Tourism Business Council of South Africa

Source: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSfRPoxt7/

Wildlife Animal Protection Forum of South Africa Official Complaint Ignored

Prior to the appointment of Minister Willie Aucamp, Spokesperson of the Democratic Alliance, to replace Minister Dion George, members of the Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa (WAPFSA) raised an official complaint which was addressed to the Honourable President Cyril Ramaphosa and the Democratic Alliance Federal Commission.

WAPFSA is a collective of thirty South African organizations, we have a documented history of interest in the protection and conservation of wild animals in South Africa, sharing a body of expertise from different sectors including but not limited to scientific, environmental, legal, welfare, rights, social justice, climate, indigenous and public advocacy backgrounds.

WAPFSA is explicitly designed as a vehicle to engage with government on the issue of the conservation, wellbeing and protection of wild animals and the natural environment in which they live. Our policy positions are based on robust science, ethical and compassionate conservation practices, and harmonious co-existence within nature. WAPFSA's activities are underpinned by an understanding that the inter-relationship between environmental protection, wildlife well-being, conservation and the values of dignity, compassion and humaneness are foundational to our constitutional democracy.

-END-