

Securing South Africa's Water Future



A Strategic Plan to Protect, Manage and Sustain Our Strategic Water Source Areas

Why this work matters?

Small landscapes. National consequences.

10% of land supplies more than 50% of South Africa's freshwater.

50%

of the population
supported

2/3

of economic activity
supported

70%

of irrigated agriculture
supported

>90%

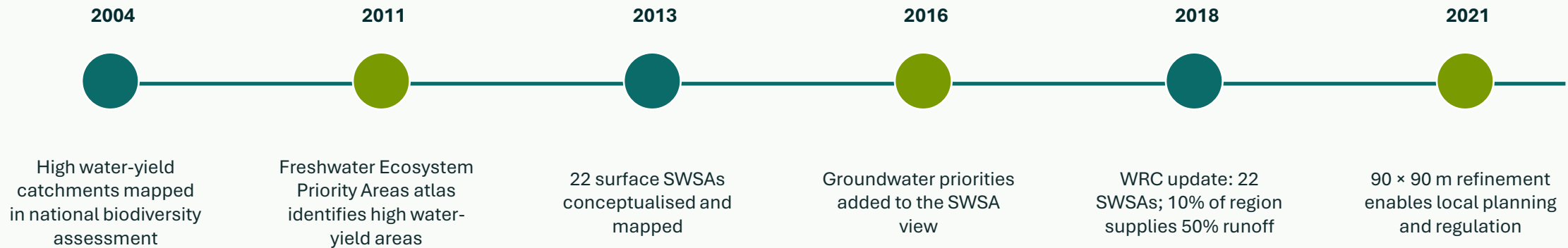
of urban water users
depend on this water

Protecting SWSAs is not just conservation — it is ecological infrastructure protection, economic risk reduction and social resilience.

The question is no longer whether these areas matter. The question is how fast we can secure them.

What counts as a Strategic Water Source Area?

“SWSAs supply excessively high quantities of the country’s mean annual runoff relative to their surface area.”



The 2021 refinement makes SWSAs practical for catchment, municipal, regulatory and investment planning.

Policy Link

The plan helps government connect mandate, regulation and implementation.

National Water Act Amendment Bill

Recognise SWSAs, enable regulations, licensing triggers and higher restrictions in water source areas.

NEMPAA & MCA cross-reference

Align protected areas and mountain catchment areas with SWSA priorities. This is incidental because NEMPAA is not a dedicated SWSA legal framework.

Catchment Management Agencies & municipal planning

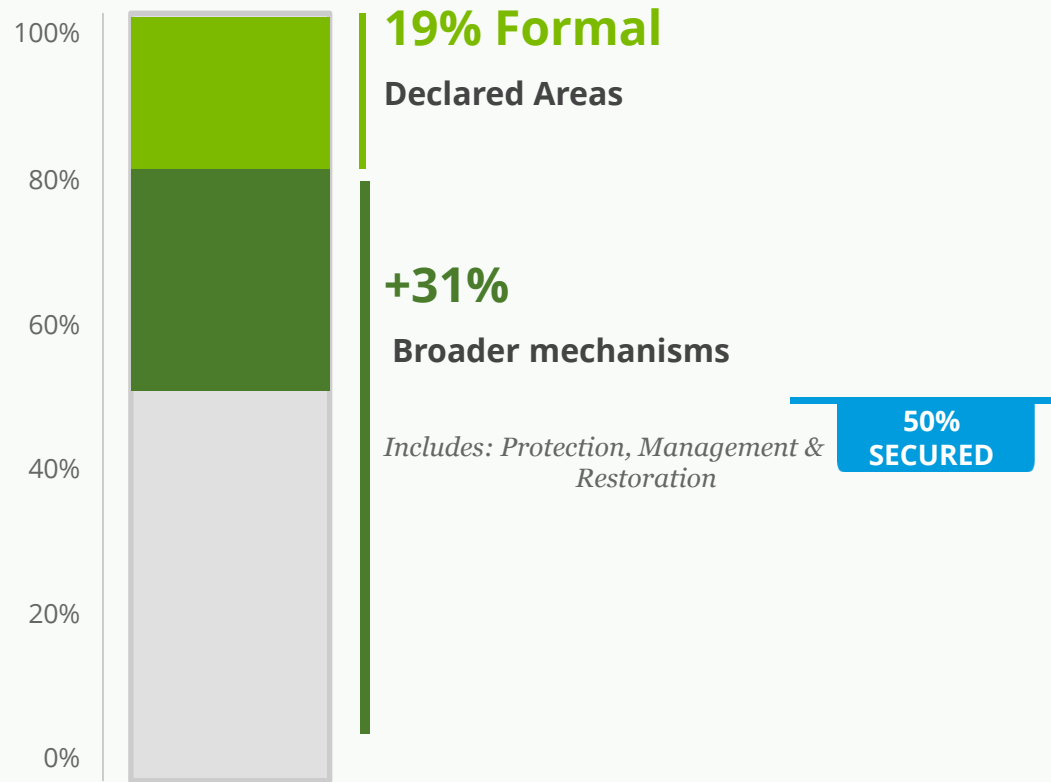
Mainstream SWSAs into catchment strategies, SDFs, bylaws, climate plans, water boards and water institutions.

SWSA protection measures

Requires securing both the landscape and the water it produces.

Why is this plan needed?

From national importance to investable priorities.



The plan adds focus:

- Identifies the top 50% within SWSAs that matter most for biodiversity, water resources and human well-being.
- Proposes practical interventions to protect, manage and restore these landscapes.
- Guides coordinated investment, policy alignment and landscape-level implementation.

What does “secure” mean?

SECURE

Progressive • Collaborative • Adaptive

The National Water Security Framework for South Africa (2020) uses the following definition of what it means to secure water, based on the 2015 World Water Development Report:

The progressive, collaborative and adaptive implementation of a range of mechanisms that aim to enhance the ability of SWSAs to deliver improved quantity of good quality fresh water. This can be achieved through better management and restoration of key water ecological infrastructure, in a manner that provides equitable benefit to people within the SWSA, improves economic activity and secures access to a sustainable water supply for all.



Manage

better land and water practices



Restore

wetlands, rivers, IAP clearing, erosion control



Benefit

equitable local value and livelihoods



Supply

sustainable water for people and economy

A plan built with the people who must implement it

The methodology was tested against practical regional knowledge.

Hilton

KwaZulu-Natal
24 Mar 2026

Gqeberha

Eastern Cape
26 Mar 2026

Stellenbosch

Western Cape
9 Apr 2026

Mbombela

Northern Regions
14 Apr 2026

107

stakeholders engaged

35

government
representatives

64

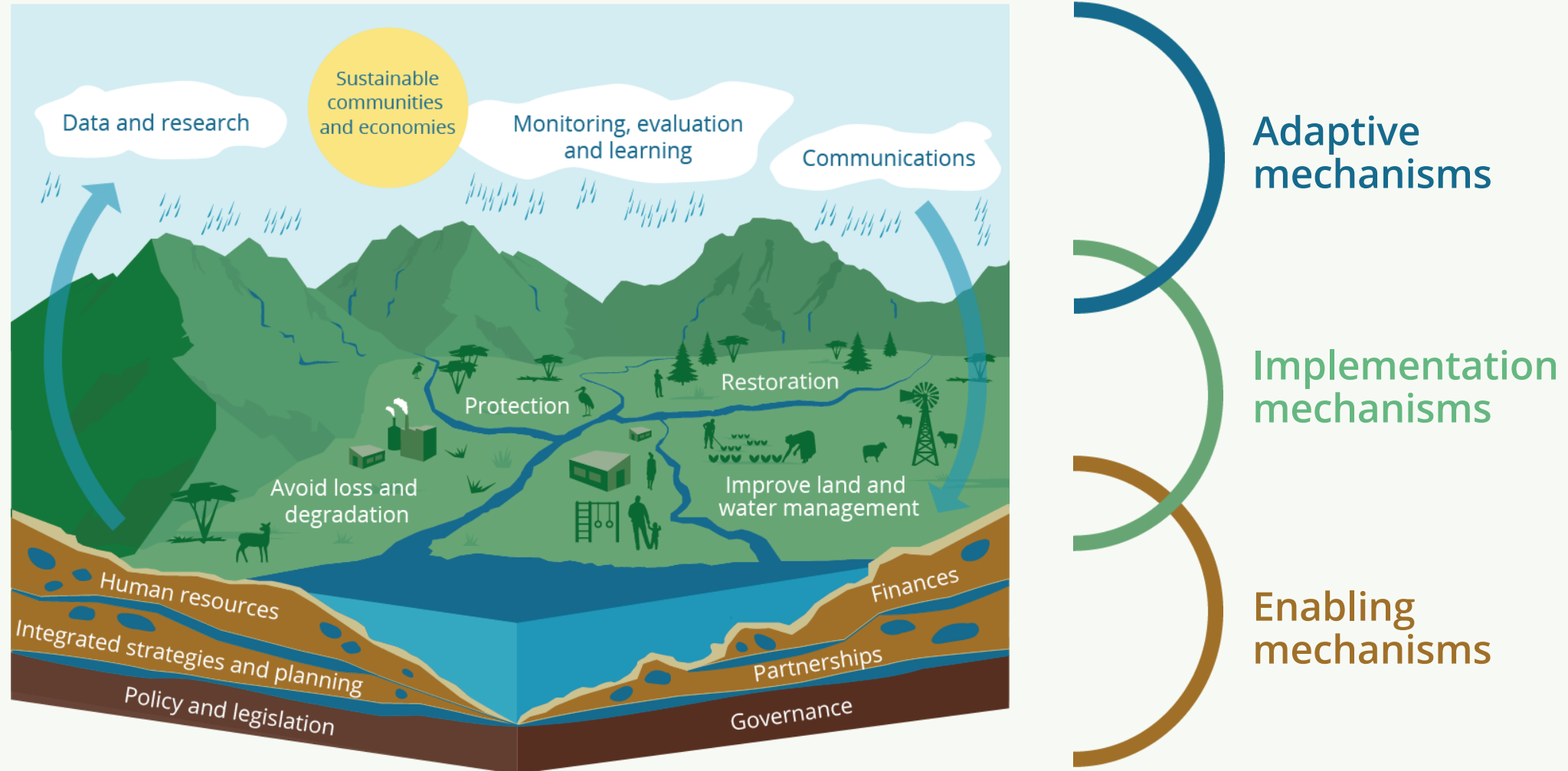
civil society + private
sector

8

municipal representatives

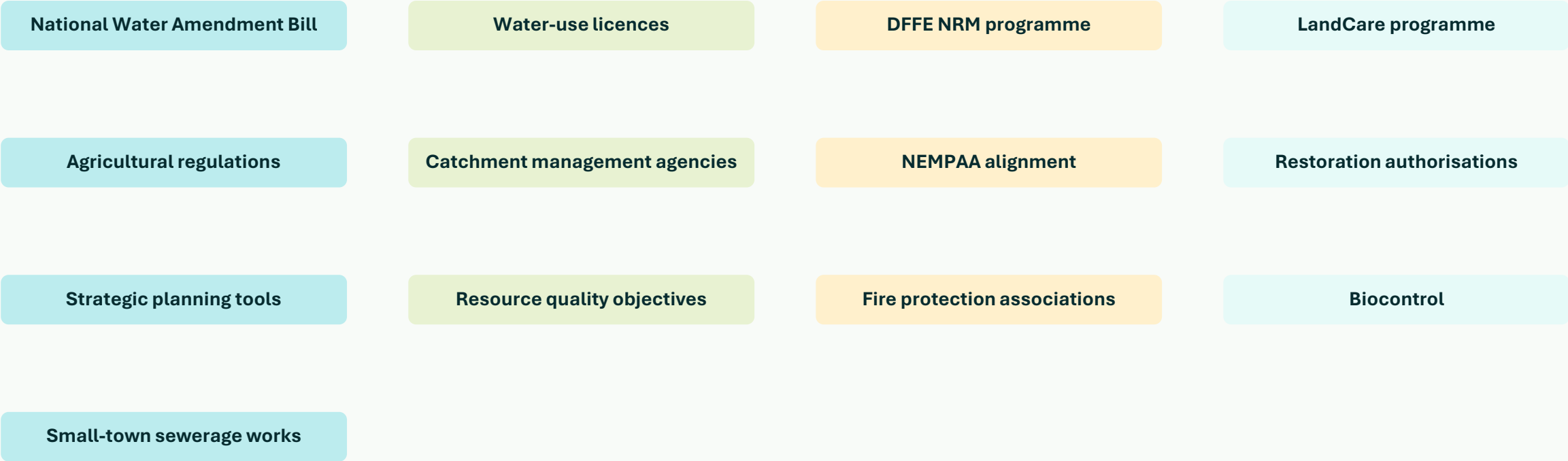
Mechanisms to secure South Africa's SWSA

A national framework: Adaptive + Implementation + Enabling mechanisms working together.



Enabling Mechanisms

Cross-cutting levers that unlock landscape delivery.



The enabling agenda is about clearing the path: legal authority, institutional mandate, financing alignment, authorisation pathways and data thresholds.

Implementation Mechanism

Criteria used to prioritise the top 50% of SWSAs

Nature Positive (NP)

1. Current ecological contribution

% of quinary protected, CBA, or natural / near-natural

2. Biodiversity priority

% of ecological contribution that is high biodiversity priority

3. Under-protected species richness

Average under-protected plant and animal species richness

Water Positive (WP)

1. Water production potential

Average downscaled mean annual precipitation

2. Water ecological infrastructure

% wetlands and rivers supporting capture and supply

3. Condition of water EI

% in good health (PES better than C) versus poor

4. Downstream dependence

Urban/economic supply, Ramsar areas and flagship rivers

People Positive (PP)

1. Disaster risk reduction need

Local catchments for high-risk settlements: fire, flood, drought

2. Limited livelihood options

% adults aged 20–65 with no basic education

3. Reliance on SWSA EI

% reliant on springs/rivers and without piped tap water

Implementation Mechanism

Interventions

PROTECT

Secure high-value natural ecosystems

New acquisition,
private/corporate/community
stewardship, protected-area and
OECM management

MANAGE

Improve sustainable production landscapes

Stewardship maintenance,
forestry management,
rangelands,
conservation agriculture

RESTORE

Restore degraded water ecological infrastructure

IAP clearing,
wetland and riparian rehabilitation,
gully and erosion control

Zoom In: Amathole SWSA

200 162 ha

SWSA size

103 735 ha

top 50% prioritised

3%

protected areas

65%

natural land cover

35%

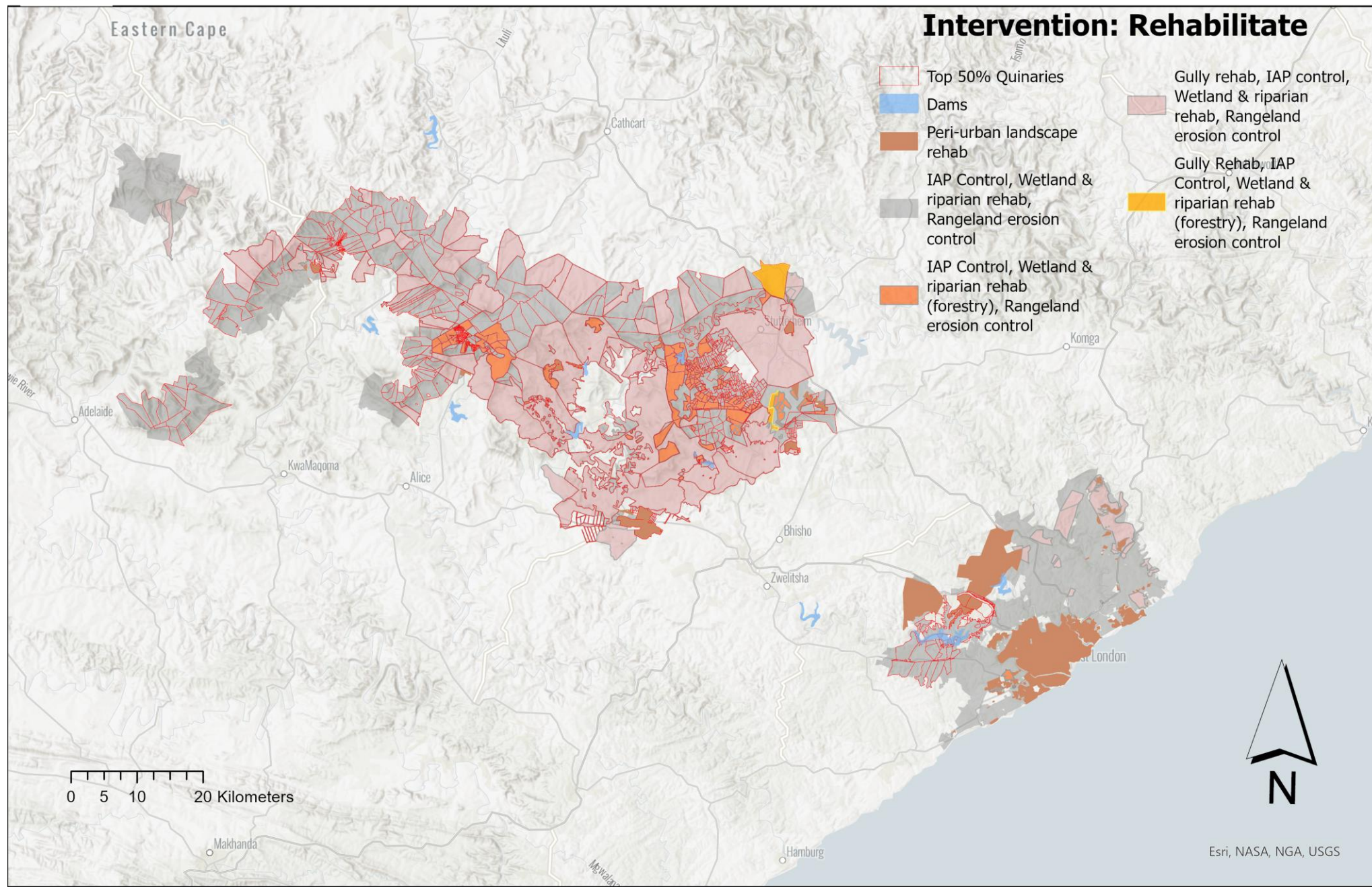
degraded land

Implementation context

- Water management area: Mzimvubu–Tsitsikamma.
- Buffalo River WUA: mainly an agricultural irrigation institution; not a catchment-wide conservation
- Key landholding: State forestry land under DFFE.
- Partnership base:
SANParks, Rharhabe Royal House, TNC, Amathole Mountain Catchment Partnership, ECPTA, EWT and Eastern Cape Conservancies Association, NGO collaborative.

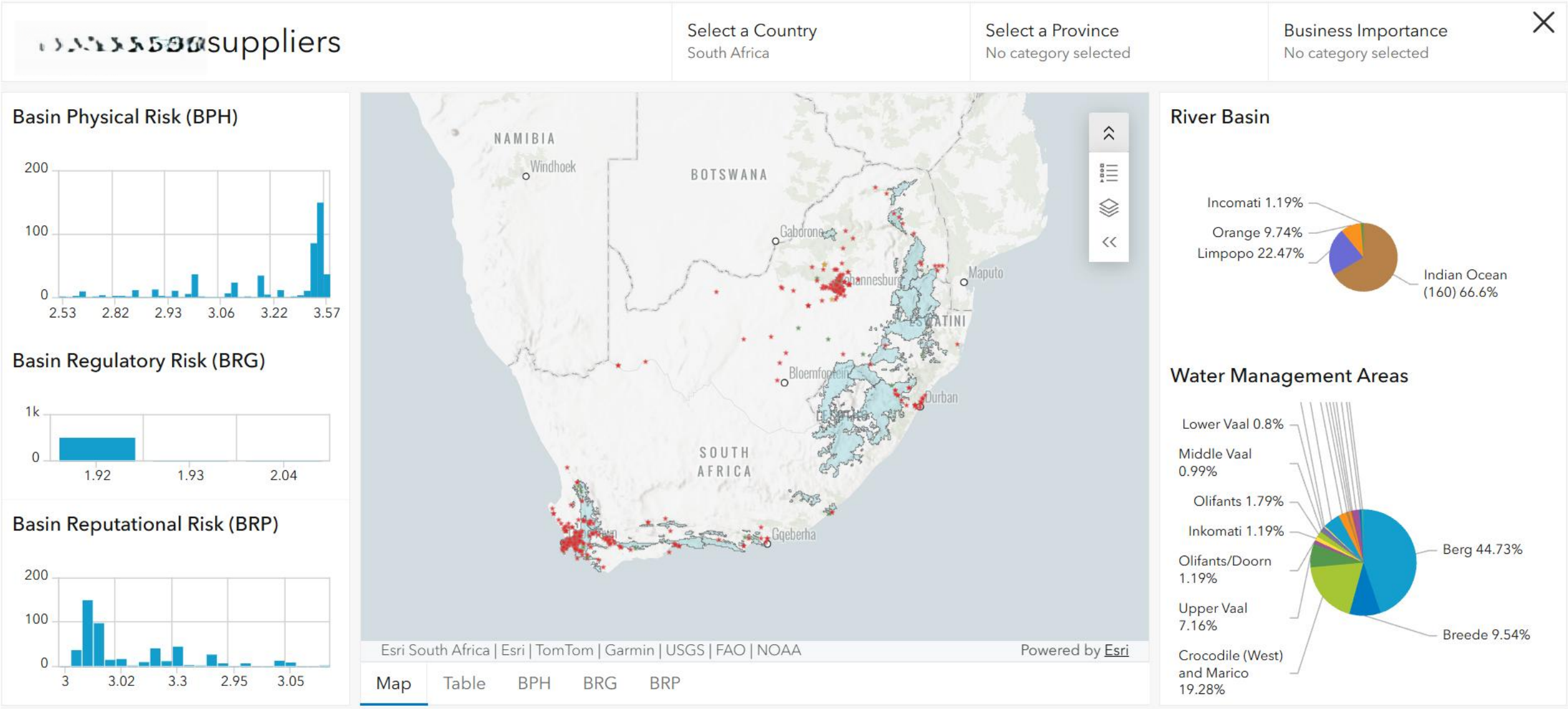


Amathole SWSA Rehabilitation Opportunities



Implementation Mechanism

SWSA Plan Dashboard



Amathole: What the plan makes possible?

Protect

Expand stewardship and strengthen protected area/OECM management in priority natural areas.

Manage

Work with forestry, communal and rangeland users to improve water-sensitive land management.

Restore

Target IAP clearing, wetland and riparian repair, and erosion control in degraded priority areas.

Govern

Use the Amathole Mountain Catchment Partnership as a coordination platform for agreed actions and investment.

Finance

Link high water users through their operations and value chain dependencies to mobilise finance around clearly defined interventions.

Thanks to our Partners:

