New face for ASPASA enviro audits

“The fate of our environment is mainly in the hands of our corporate leaders and the consultants advising them.” These are the words of Lizette van der Walt, new independent environmental auditor for surface mining industry association, ASPASA from January this year.

This energetic environmental lawyer has taken over from long-serving auditor Alan Cluett, who she says had done sterling work in raising and maintaining awareness of the need for good environmental management. After several months on the job, she has only praise for ASPASA members, who she says display an above-average commitment and interest in environmental affairs.

This makes her job as the association’s auditor easier as she continues to assist members to meet environmental legal exposure risks and to manage environmental impacts in accordance with the best practices as underlined by the association.

On a mission

Lizette sees her appointment as a personal challenge and wants to use the opportunity to promote better environmental management. “Too often companies have the best intentions of upholding sound environmental managements, but due to incorrect prioritization of environmental issues or misplaced advice from consultants they make fundamental mistakes. I would therefore like to use my time at ASPASA to share my experience with the members to ensure that their efforts yield the intended results while enabling them to build relationships of trust with regulators.”

While being satisfied that ASPASA’s policies are aligned with the latest version of ISO 14001, especially climate change considerations in this year’s revision, she cautions that policies are meaningless unless implemented effectively. “The purpose of ASPASA’s “About Face” audit programme is to monitor the effective implementation of these policies and procedures.

“This requires continuous sharing of information and experiences with members during visits and allows me to act almost like a member’s own internal environmental lawyer who visits them to ensure that the key aspects of their environmental management programmes are effectively
implemented while also ensuring that environmental legal issues pertaining to their operations are properly understood.”

**Detailed work**

She has already made her mark on the way she works. She soon realised that a brief photo feedback report optimizes the value of the completed ASPASA audit protocol to generate an audit “score”. Without the feedback report Lizette had feared that members would have difficulty absorbing all the information that is given to them on audit day.

She therefore explains that the key to success in her new role is the communication and assisting members to understand applicable laws. As an environmental lawyer, her understanding of members’ legal obligations assists members with meeting legal commitments and cites the example of a number of ASPASA member operations’ being under pressure from communities.

“Violations of legislation are low hanging fruit for aggrieved persons or groups whose aim is often to have the mining rights suspended by the regulator.” She hopes that she can help members better understand the applicable environmental laws and to be able to defend themselves effectively, if required.

**Focus areas**

With a busy schedule ahead of her, Lizette has called on members assistance with a number of issues she wishes to address during the year. These include:

- A review of the members’ understanding of their (environmental) impacts
- The credibility of the members’ internal evaluations
- Validating members’ monitoring programmes and data with a view to ensuring that these will withstand scientific scrutiny in a court of law, if ever required.

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