

# Mitigating Covid-19 risks in constructing wind farms

As South Africa enters Level 3 lockdown, sectors across the country, including wind power construction teams, are facing more stringent health and safety regulations than ever before, due to the very real threat presented by Covid-19 to workers, businesses, and the broader community of people.



Kangnas Wind Farm

“Health & safety plays a critical role during Covid-19, helping to ensure that operational wind farms can continue to produce power without risking their plant staff and the communities in which they operate, but more so for wind farms under construction, as they require strict and clear health, safety and environment (HSE) programmes that are innovative and impactful,” said Liesl Esau, the health, safety, environment & quality manager for Mainstream South Africa.

Working alongside contractors and partners responsible for constructing Kangnas Wind Farm and Perdekraal East Wind Farm, the HSE team, led by Esau (who has studied epidemiology as one of her post graduate qualification majors), has needed to take a proactive and precautionary approach to managing the health and safety, with the aim of anticipating any Covid-19 risks and plan accordingly to mitigate those risks.

Ensuring that the construction workforces, which have now returned to complete the construction of the wind farms, adhere to the Covid-19 mitigations while on and off the wind farm, is a major challenge. To overcome this, every person on the workforce has received Covid-19 transmission and protection preventative training through inductions and visitor inductions, a mitigating process that requires repetition and regular sharing of information and every person working or visiting sites are screened for Covid-19 symptoms every day.

Additionally, monitoring, tracking and auditing measures have been put in place to document the implementation and to record the measures taken, so that HSE regulations and protocols are communicated to essential stakeholders.

“Another challenge, but maybe a blessing, is the number of regulatory requirements that we need to adhere to. Not only does it make it easier for us to implement these with our contractors, it also provides the basic minimum requirement from which to work, added Esau.

Mitigative measures that sometimes draw on innovation, have a role to play during these unprecedented times. Some of these include:

- Risk assessments for activities, locations and vulnerable people;
- covering the Covid-19 risks in the planning or preparation for works such as a person who needs to do a site visit or a delivery of components or the return of employees to work/site;
- mitigate Covid-19 risks during work activities, during a trip/travel, during meetings or working in an office or on site, as well as after the activity;
- pre-planning events for scenarios if someone falls ill with Covid-19 related symptoms; and
- testing these scenarios and our response to ensure its effectiveness.

“Prior to the release of the South African Occupational Health and Safety Covid-19 regulations for workplaces, where guidelines are outlined to identify employees at risk or vulnerable employees, our company had already developed virus risk profiles for our staff to determine their individual work related risk or susceptibility to the Virus, by considering their health, job profile and job location,” she adds as a way of explaining the importance of mitigation measures in helping to limit exposure to Covid-19 and the associated impacts.

## Communities

Another aspect and important part of wind farms in South Africa, both operational and those in construction, are the surrounding communities. Working with the economic development teams, local communities and district Covid-19 disaster management centres (DMCs), HSE measures and relief programmes have been implemented.

“We are now re-opening our community offices, with strict measures to ensure the health and safety of the staff and the public who make use of the local offices. Prior to opening the offices, service providers are required to provide detailed plans on Covid-19 mitigations and measures to minimise transmission,” said Esau.

Economic development teams have been extremely active engaging and working tirelessly with the local beneficiary communities providing aid, wherever possible, to the DMC’s and local departments of health and education. Many of these programmes have included the supply of Personal protection equipment (PPE) for local community health centres, community members, district stakeholders and schools.

Operational wind farms, including Noupoot Wind Farm, Loeriesfontein Wind Farm and Khobab Wind Farm each have at least one appointed Covid-19 compliance officer, which is a legal appointment. In terms of the construction or operational sites, there may be more compliance officers per site, with the primary role being to ensure the compliance of the Covid-19 mitigations at the respective sites and to report on any transgressions or gaps.

“We measure the compliance and adherence by completing monitoring sheets, conducting internal audits and where applicable, verifying the compliance with an external auditor, which are reported to ascertain the programmes’ effectiveness,” said Esau.