

The Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) has warned that the country's environmental protection efforts are being undermined as district officers assigned to safeguard nature are increasingly diverted to unrelated duties.

REMA Director General Juliet Kabera raised the concern on October 22, during a meeting with Parliament's Committee on Land, Agriculture, Livestock and Environment. Lawmakers were reviewing the implementation of Rwanda's 2019 environmental protection policy.

Kabera said many district environmental officers have been turned into general administrative workers, performing duties such as mobilizing residents for community health insurance programs instead of monitoring land use, wetlands, and pollution.

"These officers are supposed to focus on protecting our environment and report to the Ministry of Environment or REMA," Kabera said. "But we have cases where they spend weeks on *Mutuelle de Santé* campaigns or other district activities. When that happens, no one is tracking the damage being done to our rivers, forests, and wetlands."

Kabera urged Parliament to support a policy reform that would make district environmental officers report directly to REMA rather than to district mayors, saying that such a change would ensure accountability and consistency.

"Look at immigration officers," she said. "They don't report to district mayors but to their national department. Their work is clear and effective. We need the same for environmental protection."

Members of Parliament also expressed concern over the continued encroachment on wetlands and river buffer zones. MP Jean Rene Niyorurema said that despite clear laws, residents in several areas still farm or build too close to protected water bodies.

"In many districts, wetlands are still being cultivated," he said. "We are losing our buffer zones because enforcement is weak."

Kabera acknowledged that local governments often prioritize economic goals such as harvests and tax collection over environmental sustainability. "Performance contracts emphasize productivity and revenues," she said. "But integrating

environmental protection into those goals remains a challenge.”

To strengthen monitoring, REMA has introduced drones to track illegal activities along rivers and wetlands. The agency has also reinforced land-use regulations requiring farmers to leave at least 50 meters of buffer space along rivers and 10 meters along streams to prevent soil erosion and pollution.

REMA reports that about 80 percent of environmental degradation in Rwanda stems from unsustainable agricultural practices, including poor cultivation methods and encroachment on fragile ecosystems.

Kabera said giving environmental officers clearer lines of accountability would help address these challenges. “If they can report directly to the right institution, we can detect and respond to problems faster,” she said.