

SHEREE BEGA

AN ENVIRONMENTAL watchdog has criticised proposed weather laws it believes will "criminalise" its pollution warnings for smog-plagued Vaal Triangle communities.

If the proposed amendments contained in the Weather Service Amendment Bill come into force, it means Phineas Malapela and his co-workers from the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance, could face 10 years in jail or a fine of R10 million for issuing severe

pollution alerts if they do not first seek permission from the SA Weather Service.

"This proposed law basically holds our hands up and stops everything we are doing," he said. "It criminalises our work and prevents people's access to information. Before Christmas, we realised that ArcelorMittal was releasing a lot of smoke. We took photo-

graphs and sent (them) to our partners in the environmental justice struggle. Now this will be illegal?"

The SA Weather Service Amendment Bill aims to rein in the issuing of any information that may be construed as a severe weather or pollution-related warning as the government believes this will help clamp down on false severe

weather alerts and hoax warnings that lead to "undue public panic".

But Malapela believes its potential application does not make sense.

"We're urging polluting companies to give us devices so we can alert communities when they are releasing dangerous emissions so people know what is happening and

now this is going to be prevented. It's crazy."

The bill, which creates an offences section for the first time, has caused an uproar, and the government has acknowledged these "problematic" provisions will most likely be revised.

Bryn de Kock, the founder of Storm Chasing SA, said the bill, as it stands, will censor weather enthusiasts and monopolise

meteorological information. "I'm no stranger to the annoying hoax e-mails that get passed along with the SA Weather Service logo on them, and I wholeheartedly agree it's something that must be handled and punished, but there is a huge gap between impersonating the SA Weather Service and forecasting severe weather unofficially, especially since the vast major-

ity of us that do it unofficially offer disclaimers."

The US has a similar law in place. "There is one fundamental difference. While in the US, only the National Weather Service may issue official severe weather warnings, the general public and other weather agencies still have the legal right to issue their own warnings."

Public hearings are to be

Environmental watchdog caught in eye of weather bill storm

held next week, and those "who think they are authorities in this space of information on the weather need to make their case heard if they think this bill may not stand the constitutional test", said Albi Modise, a spokesman for the Department of Environmental Affairs.

"This bill doesn't seek to control the space to close other people out, or seek to create a monopoly in the weather service. It's a sober proposal from the government to try to have one source of information as legitimate," said Modise.