

Commercial farmers on the rise

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THERE is a rise of new commercial farmers, particularly in the grain and oil-seed industries around the Matatiele, Ugie and Maclear towns.

A number of these farmers benefited from the support of organised agriculture groups and private investors such as Grain SA and the Old Mutual Masisizane Fund, among others.

Grain SA has been actively involved in the province through its farmer development programme which focused on training and skills development. The Old Mutual Masisizane Fund, together with the government, invested about R46m in farming areas around Matatiele last year.

There is also an emergence of new agricultural firms alongside these developments, with a notable one being Matatiele Grainco, a 100% black owned and directed grain group with a focus on agricultural mechanisation and transportation of grain across the eastern cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

These developments are refreshing, but there are still a number of challenges that hinder agricultural production in the province, such as poor infrastructure across agricultural producing zones and communal land tenure which is not recognised by many financial institutions.

The issue of roads was addressed and the Grahamstown High Court ordered the roads and public works department to immediately begin implementing plans to repair and maintain the largely dysfunctional rural road network.

Significantly, the judgment sets out the conditions under which farmers can themselves arrange to have damaged gravel roads repaired and then bill the government for the work done.

The department of rural development and agrarian reform has adopted the

agricultural economic transformation strategy.

The success of the strategy will be determined by the integration of land reform programmes and agricultural support programmes.

The director of communication and customer care for the department of rural development and agrarian reform, Yvonne Matshekwa, said despite their efforts at making the province's food secure, drought had severely affected the production, output of the farmers and communities in general.

She said consequently, communities experienced the shortage of water for household consumption and livestock farmers experienced high mortality rates and loss of income in the past two years.

"To mitigate the negative effects of drought, the department provided 350 water tanks, water carting of 3.5 million litres, 9 925 tons of lucerne, planting of 128ha of fodder at the Qamata irrigation scheme, construction of 24 new boreholes and repair of 75 existing boreholes.

"The long-term strategy is the provision of effective early warning systems, establishment of fodder banks, farmer education and pro-active agricultural management," Matshekwa said.

However, the recent summer rains and a positive rain forecast bring hope to farmers and the province. There has been success in other parts of farming.

In the past financial year, a total of 866 superior genetic wool sheep were distributed to smallholders and communal farmers.

Matshekwa said in the 2017-18 financial year, the department would invest R23.8m to support wool producers in the provision of shearing sheds, training, mentorship and marketing.

Matshekwa said through localised beneficiation local youth would benefit



ON THE RISE: Focusing on training and skills development, Grain SA has given a boost to grain farming in the areas of Maclear, Ugie, and Matatiele, which now is home to a 100% black-owned grain group. PICTURE: IRRAWADDI

in all department programmes rolled out in their communities.

"Going forward we will adopt a community development approach in all our fencing projects.

"The rural appropriate technology unit will support and train cooperatives of unemployed youth.

"In 2017-18 the department will engage these cooperatives for construction of planned fencing of arable land in rural farming areas covering 167km (Amathole 62km, OR Tambo 44km, Chris Hani 31km, Alfred Nzo 20km and Joe Gqabi 10km). Fencing thereby providing 838 jobs for unemployed youths,"

Matshekwa said.

She said fencing material would be provided by the department.

Payment of these developing entrepreneurs in the form of cooperatives would be processed through the post office.

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