

Outlook bleak for farm workers

30 000 jobs on the line despite R6bn drought-relief allocation

Jason Felix

EVEN though the government has allocated R6 billion in drought relief for farmers, farmworkers fear very little will come their way as many of them have already lost their jobs.

While the sector has already lost about R5.9bn, an estimated 30 000 workers are set to lose their jobs, with little provision made for those facing unemployment.

Rights groups and farmworker unions have slammed the government, saying more should be done to ensure that farmworkers retain their jobs or at least receive some sort of alternative income.

Karel Swart, national organising secretary of the Commercial Stevedore Agricultural and Allied Workers Union, said farmworkers were now poorer than ever.

“We are getting calls from people who say they are hungry and that they have no food in their cupboards. It is a really a sad situation, because people are not coping.

“It is a bad situation for farmers and workers, but it seems that the government is only worried about saving farmers. We have seen none of the government programmes in the areas where we work.

“I find it hard to believe how people are surviving these conditions, because this is really bad.”

Swart said religious and other aid organisations had been forthcoming, assisting farming communities with immediate relief.

Colette Solomon, Women on Farms spokesperson, said the government’s programmes had not reached all farming communities.

“There might have been some farmworkers approached with these programmes, but they are few and far between. Farmworkers are working less hours and therefore earning much less.

“The drought relief has focused on farm-

ers specifically, but not enough is being done for the average farmworker who risks losing much more,” she said.

Janse Rabie, head of natural resources at AgriSA, said seasonal workers would be the hardest hit.

“There are smaller crops and less working hours because of the drought. This is not an easy issue, but the government will have to step in here. Farmers will generally keep their permanent workers, but it is the seasonal ones who are most at risk.

“The government should step in and make unemployed workers part of their programmes.”

Agriculture MEC Alan Winde said while the government did have plans to save farmworkers’ jobs, it was no easy task.

“Drought relief money can only be given to livestock, because it is alive.

“About a year ago we helped emerging farmers where our allocation was used to ensure that workers remain in their jobs.

“This was done specifically for emerging farmers,” he said.

Winde said they had also engaged the Department of Labour to assist.

“There are plans with training funds, as well as unemployment funds. These will help with unemployed workers who can be sent to training and still get some salary per month.

“We are also looking at getting support from the Department of Social Development.

“We are also looking at proposals of getting farm workers into the (expanded public works programmes) which will further help them. There are also government programmes like the Water Project and Alien Clearing project which will benefit those unemployed,” he said.

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