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Author: Archie Henderson

RURAL ROADS

Farmers are doin' it for themselves

A group of North West farmers have resorted to fixing their own roads to get their goods to market. But lobbying the state and Sanral is also paying off

Archie Henderson

● Our farmers are a resourceful lot. A boer can always maak 'n plan, especially in North West when your only road to market has gone down the drain, literally.

About 18 months ago, the grain farmers south of Mahikeng struggled to get their product to the nearest silos in Maresane. Their only route, the D3546, was an impassable dirt road. The provincial department of public works, whose responsibility it is to maintain the road, was missing in action.

The farmers jumped in and did the job. They got help from Agri NW, which represents farmers in the area, and NWK Ltd, an agricultural business that's been operating in the province for about 11 years. NWK supplied the equipment and Agri NW smoothed the way with the provincial government.

Agri NW CEO Boeta du Toit says it was a delicate negotiation. "We didn't want to embarrass the government."

Agri NW and NWK met provincial premier Bushy Maape and the department of public works. They signed a memorandum of understanding, obtained official permission and got on with the job. All parties agreed that a district director would monitor work on the road. "Not that he did this, but it's a procedure," says Du Toit.

"The farmers have now fixed the road, and it's a good road."

North West is not known for the quality of its roads – or its governance. Once you are off the N4, the N12 or N18, you take your life in your hands. So the farmers lobbied for 24 provincial tarred roads to be taken over by the South African National Roads Agency Ltd (Sanral), which manages national roads. The D3546, however, was not one of these.

Du Toit says the 24 provincial tarred roads now cared for by Sanral have improved connections "for business reasons" with Botswana, and from the Northern Cape. "It's the dirt roads that remain a problem. Overall, those roads are 30% of what they should be."

He says a road-building master plan was drawn up some years ago to ensure secondary roads were in a worthy state. "The intention was good, but not its execution. It's an old story."

That story is unlikely to change soon. In 2021, according to data from Municipal IQ's Municipal Intensive Care Unit (ICU), "which combines proxies for service delivery with governance and compliance indicators", 18% of South Africa's municipalities were in "ICU" – but in the North West this was a staggering 82%.

The problem is the province's malfunctioning department of public works, which should be responsible

for maintenance. Du Toit says: "It was the first provincial department to be placed under administration. There was a lot of corruption."

The farmers continued talking to the premier, who realised something needed to be done, says Du Toit. That was when the farmers and the provincial government struck a deal for the farmers to fix the road themselves. "It was a plan born of distress," says Du Toit. "You couldn't drive on that road. It was impossible."

The farmers argued it wasn't for their benefit alone: "The road is used by the police, social services and school buses and they were destroying their vehicles."

While the farmers have now done the state's job, they are loath to absolve the department of its responsibility.

Yet a backlog in maintenance that has built up over years means the province's farmers are likely on the hook for further self-help. "It's not just about the road surface. Culverts need to be maintained to keep stormwater off the roads; trees must be removed

because these hide stray animals or even wildlife. That is where accidents happen," says Du Toit.

And it's not only in the cities where potholes are a problem. "You just don't see them when a pothole is full of water," he says.

Most farmers have no alternative but to use these bad roads, he says. "But you won't see a farmer driving a car; everyone has 4x4 bakkies. Also, the travelling time is about three to four times longer than on a tarred road."

Yet this problem is hardly insurmountable with "the right people and equipment". The farmers are making a start: they complete road reports, with photos and GPS references they send to road directors and inspectors. "It's the only way to keep them aware of the problem so that they can do their work."

Unsurprisingly, North West department of public works spokesperson Matshube Mfoloe had not responded to requests for comment by the time of going to print, despite promising to do so. ■

