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Editor-in-Chief: Reggie Ngcobo, Email: MLO.Minister@dalrrd.gov.za,
Cell number: 082 883 2458

Editor: Piwe Mbiko, Email: PiweM@daff.gov.za, Celnr: 072 937 2337

Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

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Funding from government plays a vital role in job creation

By Matsepo Malatswane

Agriculture remains one of the largest employers in our country. Small-scale and commercial farmers play an important role in our food security and contribute to our country's economic stability. The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries visited a number of farming projects in the Western Cape that are funded by the government funding plays a vital role in job creation and driving the economy of the province forward.

Many who acquire land through land and agrarian reform programmes need support to use it effectively. The CASP programme offers support services to previously disadvantaged land-owners to promote and facilitate farming. CASP has six priority areas: Information and technology management, technical and advisory assistance, marketing and business development, training and capacity-building, On/off farm infrastructure and product inputs and most significant with financial support. To monitor and evaluate the impact of CASP funds allocated to the projects and their sustainability, the Daff Team of verifiers is accompanied by Agriculture Advisors, who are able to give expertise advice on agriculture related issues.

The Western Cape Department of Agriculture assists with tools and services that will see farmers succeeding on their farms. The aim is to empower emerging farmers through skills training, mentoring and funding. It includes forming partnerships between successful commercial farmers and small-scale developing farmers. The department believes that the partnership between commercial farmers and emerging farmers will play an important role in developing successful farming businesses. It will also help beneficiaries of land-reform programmes to use their land productively.

Projects such as Olieboomskraal Project consists of seven small farmers from Slangrivier who lease 233 ha of the Slangrivier commonage situated in MosselBay. The farmers sell the eggs to a game reserve, restaurants in Mossel Bay and spaza shops around the area. The project produces 80 dozens of eggs per day; which is about 500 eggs per week. Herold Meander farm is privately owned, registered through a trust and

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was acquired through the Land Bank. The owner is one of the fifty farmers earmarked for commercialisation. The farmer is the first black farmer to produce honey bush tea. The project also has a nursery were they produce protea and honey bush seedlings.

One of the issues that the department is tackling is the water crisis due to Western Cape being affected by drought. Water available for agriculture and farmers is limited and good management practices are essential to make the most of the available water. Small-scale irrigation can play a major role in food security and poverty alleviation. The revitalisation of under-utilised irrigation schemes and the development of new irrigation schemes in areas where adequate water is available can contribute to enhancing the livelihoods of rural communities.

Officials of the department visited a number of farming projects in the Western Cape.

This is how people can help conserve insects

For humanity's sake, people need to change their attitudes towards insects. They are essential for our well-being. They pollinate a third of our crops and help make a healthy living soil. We must protect them better and learn from ideas that have already been developed in South Africa and elsewhere to conserve them. So says Stellenbosch University insect expert Prof. Michael Samways, lead author of a new review paper in the scientific journal *Biological Conservation*.

"We will never be able to conserve every insect population or even every species. That said, real, practical possibilities exist from across the world on how we can avoid further insect population loss and species extinction," says Prof. Samways, one of the founding fathers of the discipline of insect conservation.

Improved regulation and prevention of environmental risks and greater recognition of protected areas alongside agro-ecology are also key.

"Protected areas can be extended outside proclaimed borders using large-scale ecological networks of interconnected conservation corridors, which has so far been highly effective for insect conservation in South Africa," adds Prof. Samways, a distinguished professor at Stellenbosch University and author of a new book; "*Insect Conservation: a Global Synthesis,*" published by CABI in the UK.

"While small groups of people can action insect conservation locally, collective consciousness and a globally coordinated effort for species inventorying, monitoring and conservation is required for large-scale recovery," says Prof Samways.

"Luckily, civil society is increasingly becoming aware of the precipitous decline in insects and its severe consequences for planetary survival," says Prof. Samways.

"This is where insect icons such as butterflies, dragonflies and bees, popular media and natural history clubs, education and citizen scientist activities can all play a major role," he adds.

For media enquiries and the rest of the article contact:

Prof. Michael Samways
Distinguished professor in the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology
Stellenbosch University
samways@sun.ac.za

Rapid growth in access to farming technology

From precision farming to an efficient food supply chain, technology could bring major economic, social and environmental benefits but most subsistence and small-scale farmers continue to use traditional tools and processes, resulting in poor yield improvements.

According to Mr Howard Blight, founder and CEO of Agricolleges International there are solutions to small-sized African farms at cost models that farmers can afford. This is being made possible by the rapid growth in access to farming technology as cloud computing, connectivity and open-source software. Digital tools are becoming increasingly affordable and accessible.

Never before have so many people had access to smart phones, the internet and the ability these provide to seek and find knowledge while they continue to earn a living. Africa as a continent still lags behind while the rest of the world, in terms of most information and communication technologies, have access to mobile phones and the internet continues to develop.

When it comes to training and agri-education, technology is the perfect catalyst. Just as progress is being made in farming techniques, so is the use of similar advances to drive skills and education. Having recently launched an agricultural e-learning institution, Agricolleges International's aim is to educate new young learners and up-skill those already involved in the industry. "We are bringing this vision to life through the use of technology that will enable substantial improvements to the delivery of more relevant, up-to-date and accessible agricultural course content," said Blight. The delivery of the course work will be via smartphones and other devices with access to the internet, providing an exciting blended and shared learning opportunity.

For course information visit the website: www.agricolleges.com

Food security initiatives through indigenous knowledge

Compiled by John Mthembi

Rarely do efforts and initiatives to stimulate food security programmes by agents of change cater for indigenous knowledge of targeted communities. However, such a missing dimension could in some instances add value and thorough commitment to the utmost use of scarcely available resources towards food production and in a way is a strategic point for science and technology reception.

For the learning process to be informative and successful, different types of maize cultivars were planted on the plots of eight farmers. Amongst them were two BT maize cultivars. The rest were the usual high yielding cultivars. Farmers were also allowed to carry out the process in accordance with how they prefer to do it and think it is right to do so. Therefore, small quantities of just ordinary maize grains from a milling company were planted on three rows. Planting took place in the first week of May 2019. To learn more they also wanted to observe how they produce crops/food under wetland conditions. Monitoring of production practices were regularly done with the eight groups of farmers.

A lot could be learned from this project towards achieving the goal of sustainable food production and it is quite encouraging that ordinary small-scale farmers in their environment could produce and sell good quality maize at this time of the year. Furthermore, that maize could be produced twice a year by the same small-scale farmers is indeed encouraging. "Thanks to the willingness of all role players to learn together, combining indigenous knowledge with improved production practices could strengthen productivity towards ensuring food security within rural areas," said Rirhandzu Shingange, an agricultural advisor responsible for the project. "We have to continue with the learning process until we come up with the most suitable and affordable production practice for our area. Through the project we as agents of change towards better living are coming closer to what we should do and also how to do it. That definitely will save us from a hit or miss type of development approach. However, a single trial is not enough as general rules indeed cannot be made from a single observation," she concluded.

Solar enables Witzenberg Properties to reduce primary production cost

Ceres Fruit Growers, the preferred employer in the verdant fruit producing valley, owns half of Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing which sells fruit from Ceres and Two-a-Day in Grabouw.
Pieter Graaff, one of the largest single apple and pear growers in South Africa was the 2018 National Farmer of the Year and is Tru-Cape's chairman. In awarding the Farmer of the Year title and also the valued OSH Reinecke Award for Innovation in Agriculture, Graaff was recognised for leading the industry in terms of forward thinking and best agricultural practice.

Witzenberg Properties, Graaff's agricultural business, embarked on investigating alternative energy for use on its farms from early 2019. After doing a thorough analysis of its requirements, and the options available for alternative energy, Witzenberg Properties decided to install a ground mount photovoltaic solar plant for supply of electricity to two of its farming units, Die Eike and Dennekruin producing apples and pears.

In considering solar as an alternative source of energy, Witzenberg Properties not only reduces its carbon footprint but also tries to stabilise its supply of electricity to its primary production areas where irrigation of orchards in the summer months is crucial. With the cost of electricity escalating and the technological gains made over the past few years, solar energy has become much more affordable. Introducing solar enables Witzenberg Properties to reduce it primary production cost, of which electricity is currently the fourth-largest expense.

"The first phase of the project will consist of 1 904 Canadian solar PV panels generating a total of 703 kW at peak. Witzenberg Properties partnered with New Southern Energy. NSE uses SolarEdge inverters in its installation of solar plants.

Roelf Pienaar, managing director of Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing, the largest exporter of South African apples and pears to more than 104 countries says: "We believe that the plant on Die Eike is the first of its kind in the Witzenberg Valley and the Ceres area producing such a large amount of electricity for use in primary agricultural production."

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