

Eastern and Northern Cape faces dire water shortage, farmers under pressure

While much is said about the looming Day Zero in Cape Town, other parts of the country are in the grips of a water shortage that is reaching a critical stage.



Dawie Maree

Day Zero in the Western Cape is estimated to take effect this May, this will largely depend on demand versus usage and supply through the alternative sources like boreholes, and any considerations of desalination. However, there should also be concern about the critical water shortages in provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape,” says Dawie Maree, head of marketing and information at FNB Agric Business.

The Eastern Cape and Northern Cape are facing the same shortage as the Western Cape. In fact, the Kouga Dam, which supplies water to Port Elizabeth and surrounding rural towns in the Eastern Cape, was sitting at 9.2% dam for the week ending 2 February levels before the recent rains, which will probably lift it in the short term to approximately 12% for the week ending 2 February. The western parts of the Northern Cape are also experiencing a prolonged drought and livestock farmers in these areas are under immense pressure.

Impact on agriculture

“The immediate agricultural impact will be on cash crops such as vegetables as well as livestock due to their high water needs, while perennial crops such as fruit with deeper root systems might hold on for a bit longer. We may also start to see output in terms of yields and fruit

sizes decline. If the drought persists for another season some fruit trees might have to be uprooted with longer-term implications for supplies as it takes them longer to replant and grow the trees to a point where they are sufficient for production,” explains Maree.

The true impact of the drought will, in essence, depend on how the winter rain season plays out in the Western Cape and other parts of the country. However, given that the summer rain season started late, it is forecasted that the winter season might also be late. This suggests that we may see a more protruded length of the current drought.

The crisis will not simply wash away with rain

“We need to face another reality in that even when the rains return, the crisis will not simply ‘wash away’. Firstly, groundwater levels need to rise before any run-off to replenish the dams. The best case scenario would be a large amount of rain in a short space of time, in which case the process speeds up,” says Maree.

On the upside, South Africa has gone through a similar situation in the inland when Vaal Dam water levels fell critically low. When the rains returned, the Vaal Dam levels went from empty to full within a space of three weeks.

“The impact of Day Zero in Cape Town on agriculture is minimal in the short term as restrictions have already been in place to ensure that the industry does not make excessive use of water, which in essence mean that farmers are already past

their Day Zero. Should the drought persist, we may start to see a far more concerning impact on the industry, for now, we wait for the rains to return,” concludes Maree.

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