

Drought: this is not a year for business as usual

Chairperson of Economic Opportunities, Tourism and Agriculture, Beverley Schäfer recently delivered a speech which focused on the consequences of the drought on the farms in the Western Cape, during which she said it has been a critical year for all farms in the province. Agricultural workers and farmers face one of the worst droughts they can remember, despite the recent rain.



Beverley Schäfer

“This year is certainly not a year for business as usual, and I send my deepest thoughts to the daily struggle so many in the agricultural sector are now facing.”

Schäfer says that criticism is often directed at farmers being accused of not planning properly for drought-related disasters, however, it has been reported by AgriSA that the current drought is one of such great intensity that it is beyond the ability of any farmer to plan despite his or her resource base. Furthermore, it is estimated that it could take at least three years for farmers to recover from this devastating drought.

Food price inflation

While the drought can result in farms going bankrupt, for the consumer it is estimated that this drought will result in an 11% food price inflation by the end of 2016. It was reported in the media that food prices have already increased by 8%, just three months into this calendar year, and in particular an increase in bread and maize which will hit the poorest people in the country first.

“The drought has certainly highlighted the importance in promoting sustainable agricultural practices. With the scarcity of water in our country, farmers can no longer ignore sound conservation farming practices, and I welcome the drive to push conservation farming in the Western Cape. We also acknowledge the province wheat farmers who have already adopted this practice and are now seeing a greater increase in production while at the same time reducing soil erosion and improved water quality and soil health.”

At a global level, the price index of food is currently lower than that of the 1960's in terms of real prices. In South Africa however, we do not experience these benefits due to the weakening exchange rate. “Again it is the poor which suffers most as they spend the biggest part of their income or grant funds on food,” Schäfer

adds.



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Water-stressed provinces

“We are also worried how national government’s red tape worsens the impact of drought. A reported backlog of more than 1,500 water license applications submitted to the national department was yet to be finalised by the end of 2015. These applications come at a great cost to farmers, who are already struggling under financial strain. We now see a record number of farms for sale in water-stressed provinces, with 3,4 farms for sale in the Western Cape alone. “

Schäfer concludes that agriculture is the backbone of the rural economy and employment in the province. While the Western Cape exports 55% of national agricultural exports it becomes tightly linked to the food system and food security for this country.

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