

Eastern Free State potato industry in focus

By [Izak Hofmeyr](#)

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Rain had the last say at the annual Potato Information Day, presented by the Potatoes SA Eastern Free State potato working group in Warden, with conditions that were just too wet to visit the experimental plantings at Sesisonke Farming near Eeram on the way to Harrismith.



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The countrywide evaluation of potato cultivars is conducted annually under the auspices of the various potato working groups of Potatoes SA, with the aim to evaluate the potential of cultivars in the various environmental conditions throughout the country. The results of the evaluations are then presented at the Potato Research Symposium.

In order to determine the stability of the cultivars in the various environments, the evaluations must be conducted over an extended period. The yield index of 2005 to 2017 has been statistically analysed by using a REML meta-analysis to determine the stability of the cultivars over time. Some of the different scenarios include water regime (dryland vs irrigation) and growing season (summer production).

This year's research symposium is scheduled for 24 and 25 July at Khaya iBhubesi in Parys, Free State, where the results of the cultivar evaluation trial at Warden will be presented.

Cultivars

In the Eastern Free State, table potato plantings revolve around three cultivars, namely Mondial (61%), Lanorma (9%) and Sifra (8%). Seed potato cultivars are Mondial (41%), Markies (26%) and Lanorma (17%). Of the total hectareage planted, 78% is dryland table potatoes with 22% under irrigation, including both seed potatoes and table potatoes. In 2017, there were 67 producers in the region. Farmers in the Eastern Free State contribute some 24% to the potato processing industry in South Africa.

Climate change scenarios

Based on statistics obtained since 1960, it seems that, by the year 2050, the first frost can be expected later than was expected in 2010. Indications are that the last frost of the season should occur earlier in 2050 than in 2010. The implication is therefore that both autumn and spring should become warmer.

In addition, it is indicated that the number of very hot days (hotter than 35°C) in a growing season in the Eastern Free State will increase from four days (in 2010) to around 14 days (in 2050).

To adapt to this scenario of climate change, the following may be expected:

- Plantings earlier in spring (provided that rainfall patterns also move to an earlier date).
- Producers will profit from higher CO₂ levels and increased photosynthesis tempos, since yields are expected to increase, and water needs decrease.
- Should potatoes be planted during the hot summer months, the advantageous effect of the higher concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere will be countered through an increase in heat stress and higher evapotranspiration demands.
- Plantings during the cooler periods of the year (early spring) will probably lead to higher yields and higher water use efficiency due to higher photosynthesis rates, less cold stress and quicker early leaf development.
- Producers must consider plantings during late summer/autumn in future to optimally utilise the longer growing season.
- Fertilisation must be adapted to allow for higher yield potential.
- Pressure associated with diseases and pests could increase due to increases in temperature. This will cause the cost of crop protection to increase.
- Supplementary irrigation could be used to fully utilise the positive effects of climate change.

Industry sustainability

The potato industry, according to Potatoes SA CEO, Dr André Jooste, has demonstrated the power of working together as an industry. Recently, when imports of frozen potato chips threatened to compromise the sustainability of potato production in the country, Potatoes SA joined forces with the processing companies McCain Foods SA, Lamberts Bay Foods and Nature's Garden to convince the state to impose protection measures for the period 2013 to 2016 and anti-dumping measures for the period 2016 to 2021.

By working together, he remarked, it was possible to share costs, pool knowledge and expertise, and to speak from one mouth. This resulted in a financial advantage for the industry of approximately R384m for the period 2013 to 2017.

“The import of frozen potato chips puts severe pressure on the local industry since less locally produced product is diverted to processors. This means that more potatoes end up on fresh produce markets, which puts pressure on prices due to oversupply. In addition, it has a serious impact on job creation,” he points out.

State of fresh produce markets

While on the topic of fresh produce markets, Dr Jooste gave an update on the state of these markets in the country. The optimal functioning of fresh produce markets is of utmost importance to the potato industry, as almost 50% of all potatoes are traded on the market floor. The importance of the markets as acquisition points for informal traders and buyers from neighbouring countries cannot be emphasised enough.

These were some of the reasons for the development of Project Rebirth – a project aimed at the rejuvenation of fresh produce markets on the verge of collapsing by bringing together role-players and implementing codes of best practice.

Some municipalities and provincial authorities have put up funds to upgrade and expand market infrastructure. Good examples of successful rejuvenation projects include Springs Market (R185m), Pietermaritzburg Market (R15m), Tshwane Market (R37m) and Vereeniging Market (R25,8 m).

Unfortunately, six fresh produce markets are still in dire straits as the local municipal authorities were unwilling to participate in a project that could have aligned these markets with the prescribed codes of best practice. “Potatoes SA, in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) and IMASA, is currently in contact with these markets, and meaningful progress has been made toward the implementation of processes to facilitate their alignment with the rest of the market.”

Recent success stories

One of Potatoes SA’s recent successes – and one Jooste is particularly proud of – is the use of the Heart Mark, approved by the SA Heart Foundation, on the generic promotion of potatoes. This is something the organisation will certainly pursue, he said, as it will undoubtedly add firepower to their advertising campaigns.

Another great success story is the green light given to a vegetable industry role-player to establish a South African Vegetable Industry Forum. Approval has also been obtained from DAFF to create a vegetable value chain round table. The vegetable industry will use the roundtable as a communication platform to speak to the authorities, and especially DAFF, about issues concerning the industry.

Embracing technology to improve the transfer of information and knowledge is a priority for Potatoes SA, he concluded. One example is an app, available later this year, that will allow producers to access information about specific market situations at specific times. This way, informed marketing decisions can be made.

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