

Drought threatens food security and collapse of industry

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Agri SA issued severe warnings at their drought press conference held recently. If the extreme drought conditions currently experienced continues, the rural economy could collapse, which can demolish South Africa's entire agricultural industry.



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A panel of experts representing various agricultural sectors were part of the press conference. Panelists included Adri Kitshoff-Botha, CEO of Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA), Dr Chris van Dijk, CEO of the Milk Producers' Organisation (MPO), Christo van der Rheede, Agri SA deputy executive director, Willem Symington, Agri Northern Cape chairperson, Omri van Zyl, executive director of Agri SA, Gerhard Schutte, CEO of the Red Meat Producers' Organisation (RPO), Jannie de Villiers, CEO of Grain SA, and Wiehahn Victor, CEO of the Canning Fruit Producers' Association (CFPA).

Rural economy and transformation a concern

"The drought has a severe influence on the collapse of the rural economy, which is based solely on the agricultural economy," said Willem Symington. If the agricultural economy suffers, the rural economy suffers as well. With the high rate of poverty and unemployment, the rural economy is already experiencing severe setbacks.

"If we lose our emerging sector or small-scale farmers during this part of the drought, I don't know where we will find the people to drive our transformation project and achieve our objectives," added Symington.

Horticulture also seriously impacted by the drought

A study done in the Klein Karoo region of the Western Cape has found that 292ha of trees, mostly stone fruit, have already died due to the drought. Wiehahn Victor is passionate about the fact that people need to realise that trees are alive and can also die.

"However, not all trees die, but they are under severe pressure because of the drought. Another prominent point in drought situations is that the salinity in the soil breaks through to the surface, placing trees under extreme stress," said Victor.

Fruit yields are smaller and of lower quality. Horticulture is also a very labour intensive enterprise, which means that farmers have a large labour force on the farm. However, the drought has left many workers jobless. Export markets are also lost due to unfulfillment.

Livestock and wildlife under pressure

Some farmers are down to 30% of the nucleus herd. The drought is affecting commercial as well as emerging farmers. Most farmers are going back to slaughtering livestock as there is no money to purchase feed.

Gerhard Schutte offered some good news in terms of the red meat industry. "I think in South Africa we have the genes for adaptable animals in terms of climate change. The other good news is that in spite of the drought, we remain very competitive. We are still 30% below the international norm when it comes to producer prices."

He also mentioned the lucrative, well-developed and modern feedlot industry that counts in our favour. "The feedlot industry always softens the effect of drought and it always provides a very good product to the consumer."

Adri Kitshoff-Botha said that they've lost 80% of total game numbers in the Northern Cape. The wildlife market has seen a decline along with the tourism and hunting market.

We need to be better prepared

"As a country, we are not managing climate disasters very well. There's lots of work for everybody to be done to make us more resilient and to mitigate the effects of climate change. My concern is that this can cause food insecurity or less food security," said Symington.

"We need to prepare better, we need to have early warning systems and speedier disaster declaration systems in place that can handle the effects of the drought faster and better."

The Agri SA drought disaster fund has gifted R3,4m to Agri Western Cape, R1,3m to Agri Eastern Cape, R4,2m to Agri Northern Cape, and R9,9m to other provinces.