Healthy growth

SA farmers are continuing to expand the country’s production of soybeans, with a record area to be planted for the fifth consecutive season next year.

With yields — the amount produced on each hectare — also having improved over the years, the largest harvest yet of the protein-rich crop is expected in 2012.

Lower maize prices last year and better returns for oilseeds (which include canola and sunflower) persuaded farmers to divert land from maize to soybeans. Land planted with the beans was increased by more than a third to last season’s 418 000 ha.

The agriculture department’s crop estimates committee put its final soybean figure for 2011 at 708 750 t. Based on the tally it made last month of farmers’ intentions to plant, the committee projects that this will be expanded by a further 10% to about 460 000 ha in the next season. By comparison, plantings of sunflower are expected to decline by more than 13% to 553 000 ha.

This makes soybeans the fastest-growing of the crops counted by the committee.

Protein Research Foundation chairman Gerhard Scholtmeijer believes soybeans is about to take off in SA.

"It took time, but the dam wall has broken. Soybeans is here to stay. It will not disappear again," he says.

Soybeans is not a new crop in SA. Farmers have grown it for four decades. But SA has always been a net importer of soy products, though it is Southern Africa’s largest grower.

The main imports are soy oilcake, used for animal feed, and soy oil, used for cooking and producing biodiesel. About 99% of the oilcake and 69% of the oil used in SA is imported from Argentina.

Though SA imports the processed products, in the past it has exported raw soybeans. But an analytical study by the National Agricultural Marketing Council and business solutions group TechnoServe says this was when export prices were attractive and the country’s low processing capacity could not cope with demand for the processed products.

The council’s study says SA demand for soybean products will continue to rise over the next decade.

Scholtmeijer says SA’s soybean processing facilities are being expanded. Plants are being planned at Villiers, Potgietersrus and Potchefstroom. A number of smaller, farmer-run ones are planned.

And though the output is growing, Scholtmeijer says it is still some way off the optimal required for the industry in SA. "The proportion of maize land and land planted with soybeans is roughly 88% and 12%. Ideally it should stand at two-thirds and one-third."

It will mean more than doubling the current area used to grow soybeans to 930 000 ha.

Scholtmeijer says doubling the crop will make soybeans economically beneficial to SA through job creation and retaining currency.

The agriculture, forestry and fisheries department last year produced a farming production guideline for soybeans, detailing how and when to plant and the way to care for, harvest, handle and store the crop.

The council study says there is an opportunity for smallholder farmers to produce soybeans, but that about 98% of current production is by commercial farmers.

"For smallholder farmers to make the most of their land, soybeans must become a culturally acceptable part of the diet, and partnerships between commercial and smallholder farmers must increase," it says.

Mpumalanga accounts for about 42% of SA’s soybean crop, followed by the Free State (22%), KwaZulu Natal (15%), Limpopo (8%), North West (5%) and Gauteng (2%).

Scholtmeijer believes South Africans across the board should be educated about the benefits of soybeans.

"Soybeans has been wrongly portrayed as being for poor people, but it has health benefits for all. It is already being used in cereals, bread, snacks, polonies and many other products."