Farmers not exported, farms expanded

"We are not exporting farmers, we are helping farmers diversify their farming businesses and we are opening up new opportunities," said Congo Agriculture’s André Botha at the Agri SA Policy Conference held in Stellenbosch recently.

There are 25 South African farmers currently operating in the Congo.

Piet Potgieter, chairperson of AgriSaMoz, said some of the reasons for the involvement of SA farmers in Mozambique and elsewhere in Africa included the scarcity of natural resources, such as water, in SA, the political uncertainty due to land reform, as well as the opportunities offered to expand and increase the profitability of farming businesses.

Both Botha and Potgieter were adamant that there is no large-scale exodus of farmers from SA to other African countries.

Instead, they reiterated that most of the farmers involved with agricultural development on the continent are doing this to expand their current farming businesses and are still based in SA.

"We are not exporting farmers," said Botha, "we are helping farmers diversify their farming businesses and we are opening up new opportunities." He added that South African farmers should not see agricultural development in Africa as a threat to the local industry, but rather as an opportunity to expand their own agribusinesses and access new markets.

INCREASED DEMAND
Prof Nic Vink, head of the department of agricultural economics at Stellenbosch University, who was also a speaker at the conference, explained that despite an increase in per capita production in recent years, demand for agricultural products has exploded and Africa’s farmers are struggling to keep up.

Some of the challenges they face include having to compete against subsidised production in rich countries, explained Vink.

Many countries are also plagued by corruption in the institutions responsible for providing support to the sector.

Meanwhile, continued Vink, demand is quickly increasing. This is because more than 70% of Africa’s population lives in fast-growing economies and it’s expected that 50% of Africa’s population will be urbanised by 2030.

By 2020, meanwhile, 128 million African households will have discretionary income.

This will not only increase purchasing power, noted Vink, but people will also be more demanding about what they buy, possibly choosing to include more protein (meat) or other high value food products in their diet. - Donene Ensorme

ABOVE: Soya bean trials at the University of Pretoria go a long way in providing the soya bean industry with valuable data. LINDI VAN ROOYEN

SOYA BEANS
Soya bean production to reach 2.5 million tons by 2020

Soya bean production is growing steadily in South Africa and the country is expected to reach the 2.5 million ton mark by 2020.

Gerhard Scholtmeijer, Protein Research Foundation (PRF) chairperson, said the industry has shown remarkable growth over the past 12 years and the PRF expects close to 900 000 t to be harvested this year (an increase from last year’s 712 000).

Speaking at an information day in Pretoria, Scholtmeijer said the PRF is hoping to push this figure to 1 million tons in 2013.

He added that the lack of research capacity in SA has hampered the crop’s growth.

"Government hasn’t been very forthcoming in terms of developing soya, despite its importance for the feed and oil market," he said.

Prof Johann Kirsten, head of the agricultural economics department at the University of Pretoria, agreed. "If farmers are expected to produce food and to do it with confidence, then government needs to create adequate policies, or there would not be a conducive environment for production and growth," he said.

"SA imports 1 million tons of soya cake from Argentina each year," he continued. "We must reduce our dependency on Argentina and this can only be done if we stimulate our processing capacity and improve our on- and off-farm capacity for producing soya beans." This way, added Kirsten, more jobs can be created.

Scholtmeijer said that several big international oil millers are investing in SA and mills are being erected. These will be operational by 2013 and will create a roll-on effect within the industry, especially with regards to seed creation.

Kirsten said agriculture had improved its standing within the policy environment and within government, partly because of the important role it can play in job creation.

He commented on the high turnout of farmers at the information day and said their positive attitude towards farming was evident, despite the negative political environment.

- Lindi van Rooyen