**OSTRICHES**

**Feather thieves terrorise ostriches**

The ostrich industry is still recovering from the devastation caused by an outbreak of the H5N2 avian influenza in 2011, but a new threat is already rearing its head. Last month, over 50 ostriches on three farms near Oudtshoorn had their feathers stolen by poachers. Ostrich farmer Eben le Roux said he woke up one morning to find that the feathers of about 20 of his ostriches had been stolen.

"I have never seen anything like this before," said Le Roux. He added that stolen feathers were not the real damage suffered. "The feathers are worth around R500 per bird and can grow back, but the real loss is the hides."

Le Roux explained that because the feathers were plucked in a hasty and unprofessional manner, a lot of damage was done to the hides and as a result, the value would drop from about R2,000 per hide to R300. "And it is not only the attacked ostriches that were injured. All of them were chased around and they trampled over each other. They were forced into fences around the camp and that caused injury to many of them. We are now upgrading security to prevent this from happening again," he said.

A similar attack occurred on the Western Cape agriculture department’s Oudtshoorn Research Farm but during this incident, three ostriches were killed. The three birds were part of a group of breeding ostriches earmarked to be sold at an auction this week.

Dr Ilse Trautman, chief director of research and technology development services at the Western Cape agriculture department, said these ostriches could have been sold for R5,000 each because they were bred specifically to make improved genetic breeding material available to the industry. Apart from the ostriches that died after being beaten with sticks during the attack, about 30 were plucked, said Trautman.

According to a local Oudtshoorn newspaper, police arrested a man in connection with the stolen feathers but another attack occurred after the arrest.

Hein Jonker of the Saag Jonker Group told Farmer’s Weekly that about 20 ostriches were attacked on one of their farms close to Oudtshoorn. "It only happened once and we have not had any trouble since, but that is not to say we will not have similar problems in the future if the matter is not fully resolved now," said Jonker.

He said for the past six months the demand for feathers had been strong and farmers were earning between R500 to R1,000 per bird for feathers. "To stop the illicit trade of feathers, farmers should only sell feathers to recognised and registered traders," Jonker concluded.

— Denene Erasmus

**GRAIN**

**Summer crop estimates lower than initial projections**

The Crop Estimates Committee (CEC) released its second production forecast for summer grain crops for 2013 and all crops — except dry beans — have come in lower than initial projections.

The CEC said the decrease was mainly as a result of dry weather conditions in the Free State and North West. "In the drought-affected provinces there are reports that certain areas look good while others look less promising depending on when the crop was planted," stated the report.

The maize crop is expected to be 11,752 million tons — 4,88% lower than the previous forecast. The area estimate for maize remained unchanged at 2,792 million hectares, while the expected yield is 4,234/ha.

Andries Theron, vice-chairperson of Grain SA, said that the estimate figures were expected to decrease further as the real effect of the drought took hold. "The western planting regions look disastrous, but the east looks good so the difference won’t be too dramatic."

Although Theron did not expect the decrease to have an effect on the price of maize, he noted that the crop estimates recently done in the US were having a phenomenal effect. "They are expecting a big harvest and prices here have already decreased in anticipation of the bumper crop (in the US)."

Sunflower seed production is expected to be 554,500t, which is 11,17% less. The revised area estimate for sunflower seed is 504,700ha, while the expected yield is 1,10t/ha.

The production forecast for soybean is 851,000t, which is 6,99% lower. It is estimated that 516,500ha have been planted to soybeans, which represents an increase of 0,29% compared to the previous area estimate, with an expected yield of 1,65t/ha.

Sorghum plantings are expected to yield 168,114t, which is 7,40% lower. The area estimate for sorghum is 62,620/ha and the expected yield is 2,68t/ha.

In the case of dry beans the production forecast is 56,100t, which is 1,08% more than the previous forecast. The area estimate for dry beans is 43,550ha, and the expected yield is 1,29t/ha.

The third production forecast for summer field crops and the intentions to plant winter cereals for 2013 will be released on 25 April.

— Lusha van Rooyen