Farmers plant more soya and less white maize

South African farmers have increased their soya bean and dry bean plantings by 23,3% and 14,7% respectively, according to the Crop Estimates Committee’s preliminary forecast of area planted to different grains. Farmers increased the area planted to soya beans from 502 900 ha to about 620 300 ha and those of dry beans to 64 000 ha from 55 820 ha, said the committee.

“The demand for soya beans has increased markedly, as 1,5 million tons of pressing capacity came online over the past two years,” Corné Louw, a senior economist for inputs at Grain SA, told Farmer’s Weekly. “South Africa is still an importer of soya oil cake and the idea is to replace it with local production.”

The area planted to white maize is likely to be 4,1% smaller at 1,487 million hectares, while the land planted to yellow maize rose 2,8% to 1,168 million hectares, according to the forecast. White maize is mainly consumed as a staple food in South Africa while the yellow variety is used for animal feed.

“We expect an average to above-average maize harvest this year,” said Louw. “There’s enough maize and we expect a surplus of two million tons that could be exported.”

The demand for white maize was stagnant as consumers became wealthier and preferred higher protein levels in their diets, he said.

This was why farmers were planting more land to yellow maize. — Jaco Visser

Gas and oil companies push ahead with shale gas exploration

Two of the companies preparing to explore for shale gas in the Karoo have published new Environmental Management Plans (EMPs) for public comment.

Both Falcon Oil & Gas and Bundu Gas & Oil Exploration, originally applied for exploration rights in 2010, but in 2011 government announced that the processing of applications for shale gas exploration in the Karoo would be put on hold to allow it to conduct further investigations into the potential implications of shale gas development.

In November last year, the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) informed companies that had applied for exploration rights prior to the moratorium that they could update and resubmit their EMPs to Petroleum Agency SA by 27 February so that the processing of applications could resume.

However, the DMR and other regulators said that, while the processing of exploration rights applications would recommence, hydraulic fracturing would not be permitted, pending the promulgation of technical regulations for its use in South Africa.

According to Bundu’s environmental consultants, Golder Associates, the revised work programme proposed by the company focused specifically on seismic data, geological investigations, hydro-census and core-drilling activities. Drilling would take place during the third and final phase of the new exploration plan and would involve “conventional exploration drilling of up to three exploration boreholes”, according to the EMP.

The exploration block for which the Bundu application was made remained unchanged from that presented in 2010 and included various farms within the magisterial districts of Somerset East, Cradock, Pearson and Jansenville, covering a total area of approximately 4 200 km².

Instead of fracking, Falcon proposed the use of seismic surveying for exploration purposes. Its application area encompassed approximately 30 000 km² within the districts of Ceres, Laingsburg, Prince Albert and Beaufort West in the Western Cape; Fraserburg and Sutherland in the Northern Cape; and Aberdeen, Graaff-Reinet, Jansenville, Willowmore and Pearston in the Eastern Cape.

Some 2 410 farms and farm portions were included in the application area and 426 farms and farm portions were earmarked for seismic surveying activities. Jeanie le Roux, director of operations at anti-fracking lobby Treasure the Karoo Action Group (TKAG), said this method was “quite invasive” and could pose a risk to natural vegetation and groundwater resources — depending on how shallow (or deep) the groundwater resources occurred.

It was “highly problematic”, she said, that the applications for exploration rights were allowed to go ahead before the regulations on hydraulic fracturing and shale gas exploration were finalised and signed into law.

“It does not make sense that the EMP documents are requested to be submitted when the regulations to which they would have to adhere are still in draft format,” said Le Roux.

The TKAG was encouraging members of the public to register as interested and affected parties and submit comments on the Falcon and Bundu applications and EMPs before 16 February, she said.

— Denene Erasmus