

Agriculture in an Open Opportunity Society

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The profitability of agriculture will be a key focus area in the new government's open opportunity society. It is only when agriculture is profitable that it attracts investors, creates new job opportunities and attracts young talented students to the sector.

The Department of Agriculture has a budget of R398.6m. Of this 25% (R113.844m) will be used to support new farmers. I would like to see these farmers progress from newly established to profitable commercial farmers. We believe new farmers deserve the opportunity to succeed in their endeavours in an open opportunity society. We should distance ourselves from the idea that a small farmer should stay small. In the Western Cape we won't stand in the way of anyone's attempt to attain their dreams.

Only 16% of the total budget is allocated to research. This has to be enlarged in the future, as research plays an imperative role in keeping our farmers sustainable. Agriculture is a highly specialised field requiring farmers to compete internationally. Our farmers do not enjoy protection in the form of subsidies as some of their overseas counterparts. Technology and research must be used to ensure our competitive edge in the market.

There is basic research that cannot be left to the private sector, since it is not profitable. Long term research on climate change is one such example. The department has an obligation towards farmers in this regard.

Our sustainability programme is doing pioneering work in water usage in agriculture. New irrigation technologies as well as new water sources are being investigated. This budget has allocated R44.4 Million for this, as well as research into sustainable production techniques.

We will spend R46.985 m in this financial year on veterinary services. The management of state abattoirs and phytosanitary services is crucial to maintain and develop export markets for our life stock producers.

New farmers need the same access to technology as well established commercial enterprises. They should not have to plant dated cultivars that are no longer in demand or economically viable. They should benefit from cost saving techniques and modern irrigation systems. In an open opportunity society there is no discrimination based on the size of enterprises when government support services are at stake.

Our extension officers have an important role to play in communicating new research to new entrants. We have already started with a project to grow our extension officer corps from 71 to 119. Extension officers will in future be better trained to enhance their efficiency.

We are busy with our hundred day deliverables, which include the following:

1. A new extension officer monitoring system that will make use of a magic pen to monitor extension officers' movements and actual work being done.

2. We recently hosted a climate change conference, which was attended by representative of the United Kingdom government, the South African Agri Academy and our department. Local as well as international experts on climate changes delivered presentations at the event.
3. We are establishing a policy framework for rural development.
4. The deciduous fruit industry's emerging farmers will be financially supported to establish 600 hectares of fruit trees.
5. An agribusiness investment unit, focussing on rural development, will be launched.
6. Ten farm workers will visit Burgundy to gain experience from the French wine industry.

Rural development is now also the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture. Although agriculture can contribute to rural development, it is by no means the only way to achieve this objective. In an open opportunity society, investors are not viewed as enemies but allies. We will use incentives, such as tax breaks, and create special economic zones to attract investment. Our first rural development project will be announced before the end of this year.

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