

## **Agriculture debate in the National Chamber of Provinces**

15 June 2011

### **Speech delivered by Minister van Rensburg**

Speaker, Minister Joemat-Pettersson, provincial MEC's, and friends of agriculture: I am sure most, if not all of you, will agree with me that the summer of 2010/2011 will be remembered for all the things that went wrong for the agricultural sector.

It was as if Mother Nature lost her temper with South Africa. While Flooding took place in one area, there was a pressing drought somewhere else. We were confronted with almost all the dreaded animal diseases known to us. All of these calamities were thrown at us in one season.

Speaker, so let me begin with a salute to the people who till the land in South Africa. We all know Africa is not for sissies. We all also know farming is not for sissies. I have the utmost respect for the farmers and farm workers of South Africa who keep on providing our nation with food and fibre, come rain or sun shine.

Speaker, as representatives of the South African Government, we have a very important supportive role to play regarding the farmers of South Africa. As government officials, each and every one of us here today need to remind him or herself of the critical importance of affordable, safe and available food to our society.

Speaker, I want to state today: If we think service delivery protests are disrupting to our nation; we do not want to see our nation out on the street because it is hungry: Hungry; because there is no affordable food to buy.

Speaker, I want to address three issues; each of whom I belief to be of critical importance to our core mandate of supporting food security: These issues are: Research; veterinary services, and the protection of agricultural land.

In the Western Cape, we have increased our spending on research significantly, and we will be investing more than R100 million annually on agricultural research within the next three years.

Without research, we cannot compete internationally. And Speaker, the previous food price crisis in 2008 showed us that it is dangerous to assume food will always be available on the international markets. Once countries worldwide stop exporting in order to meet their local demand, it is a situation of “each country for itself”. South Africa should always be aware of these possible risks. South Africa has a responsibility towards its citizens to always produce enough food.

Research is the foundation from where we have to create our own food security. We need new cultivars; better production methods. We need to understand climate change. We need new crops that will be suited to our changing climate. We need to save water.

Speaker, the past few months have highlighted the important role veterinary services play in South Africa. Vets play a critical role in maintaining food safety. Vets, together with health services, are directly responsible for our personal health and safety. This fact was dramatically illustrated with the deadly Rift Valley Fever outbreak in 2010, where an animal disease also led to human fatalities. Speaker, but vets also allow our farmers to run businesses; employing thousands of people, thus supporting millions of people in our country.

Speaker, when a disease strikes one of our animal industries, the negative effects are felt far and wide. Allow me to illustrate this point with the ongoing crisis in the ostrich industry.

- This R1.2 billion industry is currently faced by an export ban due to the detection of H5N2 on farms in the Oudtshoorn area.
- 90% of ostrich meat is destined for exported.

- This industry employs 20 000 people in the greater Oudtshoorn area. When downstream and upstream linkages are considered; more than 50 000 employment opportunities are affected.
- This industry cannot operate or survive without the regulatory support from government. And this is not only about the farmers. This is also about the farm workers; the truck drivers; the abattoir workers; the factory workers. This crisis affects each and everyone who supports a family with wages earned from ostriches. In Short: If this industry was to collapse in Oudtshoorn, a total rural economy is at risk of collapsing, with negative ripple effects throughout the country.

Speaker and it is during a crisis that one discovers the interconnectedness in agriculture. For example:

One of our ostrich abattoirs process game meat during the winter months as a strategy to offset the off season for ostrich meat. This strategy allows the abattoir to provide year round employment for more people. But now there is also a Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak, which also resulted in this industry grinding to a halt.

Another example: There are 69 ostrich Black Empowerment farmers in the Eastern Cape who are making a living by raising ostrich chicks. Due to the quarantine measures currently in place in Oudtshoorn, they will not be able to receive birds, thus also threatening their chances of survival. And in so doing, another agricultural empowerment project is added to the statistics of land reform failure.

Speaker, as government there are certain basic things we have to do:

- We have to protect our ability to be food secure. Even an industry such as the ostrich industry, contributes to food security, as it pays wages that can buy food.
- In order to protect our national food security, we have to do research.

- We have to provide the veterinary services associated with all the livestock industries.
- We have to manage and promote international protocols and relationships to create the platform from where our farmers can do business, and create employment.

Speaker, regarding the H5N2 outbreak in Oudtshoorn: I want to go on record and thank Minister Joemat-Pettersson for the excellent cooperation and support we have so far received. This includes:

- Compensation paid to farmers for culled birds.
- Cooperation with state veterinarians who came to assist us in Oudtshoorn.
- Cooperation in negotiations with the European Union.

Speaker, there are still many challenges ahead. We are in the process of trying to have the entire ostrich industry declared a disaster. Due to the far reaching effects of the export ban, compensation to individual farmers is only the tip of the iceberg. We now need to find ways in which to assist all the people who are at risk of losing their source of income. We need to consider measures ranging from food parcels, right through to low interest loans, to assist the entire industry in this difficult time.

Speaker, I want to propose that we accredit private laboratory facilities in order to assist us in processing disease test results. This will allow us to respond much faster to such disasters.

Speaker, it is also our responsibility to protect agricultural land. We need agricultural land to be productively utilised in order to promote national food security. I am therefore concerned about the current Draft Spatial Development and Land Use Bill.

The protection and management of agricultural land has always been the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, and this is as it should be. If the Bill is to be passed, an important part of this function will be taken over by Land Use Regulators at a local level. I

am concerned that these Regulators may not have the necessary focus or expertise to protect agricultural land for food production purposes. We, as the provincial and national Departments of Agriculture, should play the leading role in the determination of the use of land which is currently used for agricultural purposes as well as any proposed change in land use.

Speaker, I conclude: The difficult times we are facing can be overcome through simple hard work and dedication from our officials and politicians. We want to make a success of South Africa. Our responsibility, as servants of agriculture, is to create the environment for food production to flourish. This will stimulate job creation in the agricultural sector. This will ensure and safeguard the supply of healthy, safe and affordable food for all the people of South Africa.

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