

AGRICULTURE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

WANDILE SIHLOBO: Dryland wheat farming in Eastern Cape needs support

Farmers embarking trials in the Eastern Cape have demonstrated success in the expansion of maize production

BL PREMIUM

05 July 2018 - 05:10 Wandile Sihlobo



Picture: ISTOCK

Almost every Sunday afternoon I make a couple of phone calls to a number of farmers across the country to catch up on regional news and agricultural conditions. This past weekend I followed that routine, with a number of farmers briefing me about summer crop harvest progress.

Feedback from Western Cape folks indicated an appreciation for heavy rains, which according to the South African Weather Service might be more frequent over the next three months. The Eastern Cape farmers brought to my attention something I have not been thinking about of late – the possible expansion of winter wheat plantings to new regions in the country.

Victor Mongoato, who farms in Matatiele, together with associates in Ugie and Maclear in the Eastern Cape, are preparing field trials for various dryland winter wheat cultivars. Mongoato says they are starting the trials "in one of the best seasons, with high soil moisture following good summer rainfall, and there is a good chance for snow and light showers over the winter season".

I was impressed by this initiative for two reasons. First, the idea of possible expansion of winter wheat plantings in SA is encouraging given that the area planted has been steadily decreasing over the years. Between the 1994-95 and 2017-18 production seasons, the country's winter wheat plantings declined by more than half to 491,600ha, according to data from the South African Grain Information Services.

This decline could partially be attributed to the effects of climate change, which has resulted in many farmers, particularly in the Free State, opting out of high-risk wheat production in favour of other crops and farming activities.

Due to the decline in production and growing domestic consumption, wheat imports have increased significantly. In the 2017-18 marketing year, SA's wheat imports are estimated at 1.9-million tonnes, up from 681,559 in the 1994-95 season.

Most importantly, the expected import volumes equal two thirds of this country's annual wheat consumption.

Second, the farmers who are embarking on dryland trials in the Eastern Cape have in the past demonstrated success in the expansion of maize production. I highlighted this back in March, but it is worth restating to add a bit of context. In 2013 black farmers in the Matatiele area of the Eastern Cape province were producing 6,000 tonnes of maize on roughly 1,200 ha.

By 2017 the area planted to maize had increased to 4,000ha and the harvest was 28,000 tonnes, according to data from Matatiele Grainco. This harvest is almost a third of the Eastern Cape's commercial maize crop, and the yield is higher than the national average. This growth was underpinned by an improvement in yields, coupled with expansion in the area.

I am not saying Mongoato et al will ultimately solve the country's declining wheat production problem, but their intent at a time when agriculture is topical in terms of transformation and development should be supported. The previous example of their success in maize production was backed by both organised agriculture and the government. I sincerely hope their exploration of dryland wheat production will receive similar support.

As encouraging as this initiative sounds, the Eastern Cape still has fundamental challenges that could slow its agricultural development. These include poor infrastructure (particularly roads and silos) across agricultural production zones and the issue of communal land tenure, which limits the ability of farmers to access additional finance.

Such infrastructure is an important precondition for thriving crop production.

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