

Future is now for farmers

Kwanalu funds Howick-based initiative

EDWARD WEST

THE KwaZulu-Natal Agricultural Union (Kwanalu) has secured R12 million of funding for the Future Farmers initiative run by Howick farmer Judy Stuart.

Future Farmers is an initiative that helps place young aspiring farmers on local and international farms to equip them with the necessary skills and experience needed for employment in the agriculture sector.

The initiative has historically been run on a shoestring, so the R12 million funding represents a massive boost.

The programme aims to give young people aged between 18 and 26 the opportunity to "learn as they earn" by finding apprentice positions on local and then later, international farms.

The brainchild of Howick dairy farmer Judy Stuart, Future Farmers was founded in 2005 after she identified a two-fold void in the agricultural sector. One being that of training and experience for potential young farmers and, secondly, thanks to her international travels, the demand for hard-working and passionate youngsters on international farms.

She said at a conference in Durban yesterday that she has had to run the programme on a very tight budget for

most of the time — she started the programme with no budget at all — and that she would be able to place many more youngsters with additional funding. Now 10 years later, with many successful placements of eager young SA farmers on farms in New Zealand, Australia, America and Denmark, Future Farmers has become a recognised role-player in the future of KZN farming.

The programme relies on local farmers to employ these young people at apprenticeship level to teach them the skills, knowledge and experience needed in farming. They are required to work for an agreed period of time on this farm before qualifying for a second apprenticeship abroad.

Stuart explains why, irrespective of education or experience, each candidate must start at ground level.

"They may have to wash the dairy, clean calf pens, sweep floors and clean windows, and although it may seem that this has nothing to do with farming management, they are given the opportunity to show their dedication to farming. One day when they are a manager, they will need to be able to delegate these tasks to staff and they must be able to do these jobs and do them well. This is the way you earn respect," she said.

The second part of the programme places the young farmers, with the necessary criteria, on international farms where they work for a period of one year, gaining further invaluable experience before returning to SA to secure employment in the agricultural sector of their choice.

Future Farmers receives hundreds of applicants monthly from all over the province and further afield who undergo a rigorous selection process.

"This funding will expand Future Farmers' capacity to employ mentors and allow more young people into the programme. We are delighted to have found a way to help nurture and shape the future of agriculture in such a positive way" said CEO of Kwanalu Sandy la Marque.

La Marque said that what Future Farmers and the future of farming really needs is open-minded, local farmers to come forward and participate in the programme, either as mentors or as employers. "As a union, it is imperative we are at the forefront of initiatives that promote and create new opportunities in our field, but it is especially important that our members are positively and actively involved in the processes that will uplift the future of agriculture," she said.