



COMMUNICATION SERVICES

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Agreement to rescue sugar harvests

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IN A blueprint for land restitution the government and the South African sugar industry signed an agreement at the weekend which officials say will prevent the collapse of productive sugar cane farms handed to future claimants.

The chief land claims commissioner, Nomfundo Gobodo, and the executive director of the South African Sugar Association, Trix Trikam, signed a memorandum of agreement on Friday in which the government agreed that the sale and handover of claimed farms must coincide with seasonal farming processes.

The agreement aims to prevent the collapse of thousands of hectares of high-yielding agricultural land claimed in the province.

In 1994 just 2% of sugar cane farms were owned by black farmers. Now most of the sugar cane farming land in KwaZulu-Natal is under claim.

About 77 000ha (22%) has been handed over to claimants since the first application for land restitution deadline in 1998.

However production on most of the farms had all but collapsed by 2013 as a result of corruption, a lack of farming skills, loan finance issues and a lack of technical support for the new farmers.

Last year President Jacob Zuma announced the reopening of land restitution applications, setting a new deadline of 2018.

Anwhar Madhanpall, the general manager for land reform and rural development at the Sugar Association, said his office and the government had worked on the agreement for more than a year, and finally getting it signed was a milestone for the industry.

"What we have agreed with the government is that buying a farm in the middle of the harvesting season, for example, is not feasible.

"So, we have come up with a partnership agreement where we can work together to make sure that the production

on sugar farms that are claimed carries on regardless," he said.

Gobodo hailed the partnership deal, saying that she hoped it would send a message to those in the sector that when there was a land claim in an area, it did not mean the end of productivity or that farmers should "run away".

Madhanpall said the agreement was based on a settlement model and a business process manual, both of them devised by the Sugar Association.

The role of the regional land claims commission in the agreement was to provide information on land claims timeously, to allocate funding for the settlement of the claims and funding for the recapitalisation of the transferred properties if it was needed.

Planning

Also, the commission must provide the necessary staff to ensure the claims were settled quickly and in line with the industry's annual harvest planning.

The commission also agreed to stick to the guide lines outlined in the industry's restitution settlement mode and its business process manual.

In return, the sugar industry agreed to co-ordinate the annual planning process with the commission, compile agro-nomic assessments and a business plan for each claimed farm, carry out site inspections and provide support regarding the ideal settlement models for the properties.

The industry would train members of the claimant communities in the required standard of farming practices.

Madhanpall said there was no reason the settlement mode and business process manual could not be adopted by other farming sectors.

"We have done the ground work. All the other farming sectors would have to do is adapt it to their farming cycles and processes. It's a blueprint for them," he said.