

# Cotton takes centre stage in remote area

TNA REPORTER

AGRICULTURE is taking centre stage to fight poverty in the remote Makhathini Flats area where the government is promoting a cotton plantation.

Cotton farmers are spread out in almost all municipalities within the Umkhanyakude district municipality of northern KwaZulu-Natal and offer ongoing much-needed job opportunities to the local population.

Provincial agriculture and rural development MEC Cyril Xaba reaffirmed the government's commitment to support the crucial agriculture sector. He said most of the cotton farmers were women.

"We have identified cotton as a key commodity in Umkhanyakude. This is reinforced in the Makhathini integrated master development plan and more recently, in the Operation Phakisa lab," he said.

Xaba accompanied Rural Development and Land Reform Deputy Minister Mcebisi Skwatsha on a visit to a number of productions in the Makhathini area at the weekend.

Xaba said through Operation Phakisa there had been intense interaction with farmers and stakeholders looking at how cotton as a commodity could play a pivotal role in economic development in the area. He said the Operation Phakisa report would go to the provincial cabinet shortly and thereafter be formally presented to the cotton farmers and other stakeholders.

"We have been interacting with the

Cotton Growers Association of KZN and with Cotton SA to promote a partnership with these commodity organisations so that we can collaborate to grow the sector."

Skwatsha said that the department had pumped about R500m for the roll-out of agri-parks. "This amount does not include contributions from other sector departments such as Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Cogta and others," he said.

Skwatsha said the initiative at Makhathini represents one of the successes within the enterprise element of the comprehensive rural development programme.

He said the department's investment of about R11.5m had served as a catalyst for the initiative.

"We are glad that it will drive job creation in the cotton industry. The joint efforts of various departments on this project are commendable and encouraged."

He said they were working hard to strengthen the linkages from primary cotton production through to the textile industry. "We are in discussions on this issue with the cotton commodity sector and the textile industry to create a long-term partnership that will focus on skills development, infrastructure development, enterprise support and market access," the deputy minister said.

Skwatsha said they aimed to enhance cotton production by smallholder farmers in the Makhathini region to enable them to become sustainable producers of quality cotton and to be involved in the value chain.