



LOCAL COMMUNITY BUY OLD GINNERY

Makhathini cotton comeback

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Nokuthula Ntuli

THE rural Makhathini Flats, near Jozini, are on track to again become the cotton capital of KwaZulu-Natal after the government helped local people buy the ginnery.

The Makhathini ginnery closed down in 2007 when it was placed under liquidation by the Land Bank. This crippled the 3 000 local farmers who were supplying it with cotton.

"Some were able to send their cotton to a ginnery in Limpopo but others simply stopped farming cotton and let their land lie unproductive," said Charles Kekane, the ginnery's operations manager.

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries heard the community's pleas and bought the ginnery in 2010 for R30 million, intending to re-commission it to process locally produced cotton. Millions were also spent on refurbishing the machinery and fencing the property before the ginnery reopened in 2012.

"We are not back to where we were (before 2007) but we are hopeful that the local farmers will pick up their tools again and we will have a profitable ginnery that is of benefit to everyone because this plant belongs to the community," said cotton farmer Phineas Gumede.

On Friday the KZN MEC for Agriculture, Cyril Xaba, and Deputy Minister for Rural Development and Land Reform Mcebisi Skwatsha visited the ginnery to assess its progress.

They also met local farmers to discuss plans to grow the project into a comprehensive agri-processing plant for cotton and other products such as glycerine, margarine and cooking oil.

Currently the cotton seeds are sold to livestock farmers as cattle feed because of a lack of



Cotton farmer Phineas Gumede, left, shows KZN MEC for Agriculture Cyril Xaba, centre, and Land Reform deputy Minister Mcebisi Skwatsha harvested cotton before the seeds are removed. Top right, Skwatsha tries his hand at harvesting cotton during his visit to the Makhathini ginnery on Friday. Right, Gumede tells Skwatsha and Xaba about the advantages of rotating cotton with nutritional crops such as butternuts.

PICTURES: SANDILE MAKHOBA

machinery. The government is in the process of transferring the ginnery to Ubongwa Farmers' Co-operative which comprises 32 farmer associations with a total of 1 579 farmer members.

"This co-operative will become solely responsible for the successful operation of the ginnery. This will result in farmers being involved in more stages of the value chain of cotton processing," said Skwatsha, who appeared pleased

with progress being made.

uMkhanyakude Business Chamber chairman Hebron Nxumalo said the ginnery had created employment opportunities for those who did not wish to go to urban areas.

Seventeen people are permanently employed but dozens of seasonal jobs are created for cotton and nutritional crops that are planted when the cotton is not in season.

"Our hope is to see farmers bringing at least 2 500 tons of

cotton into the ginnery. At the moment we are getting 600 tons so it's not a profitable venture yet, but close to R4m has been paid to farmers since 2012," said Gumede.

One of the 938 female farmers involved, Matozi Simelane, said agriculture was the future of the region because of its flat terrain and moist soil.

"We want to see more young people being beneficiaries because now we have only 129 youth involved," she said.

