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FOOD SUPPLY WORRY, SAYS MEC

Vast tracts of farmland left untended

Nokuthula Ntuli

VAST tracts of once productive land in KwaZulu-Natal were lying idle despite efforts to uplift emerging farmers, Agriculture MEC Cyril Xaba told commercial farmers and agricultural organisations in Durban yesterday.

About 335 000 hectares of agricultural land, awarded through the government's land reform programme, were affected.

The KZN Agriculture and Rural Development Department was presenting its new approach to agrarian reform.

Xaba said most of the under-utilised land was in the hands of communal property associations and community trusts.

"The problem is that those who are now getting the land are the fourth or fifth generation of those who initially lost it, so for them it's an emotional issue rather than a real passion to work the land," said Xaba.

The province could not afford to have productive land lying idle as the country needed to double its food supply by 2035, when the population was expected to have doubled.

A Department of Agriculture official, Carlos Boldogh, said the government was considering partnering established commercial farmers in funding the revitalisation of unproductive and new farms. This would go beyond just mentoring and would include joint ventures and profit-sharing with new farmers.

"If new farmers fail to use the land maybe we should look at financially compensating them for the land and then give it to those who will use it productively," he said.

Representatives of different commercial commodity organisations did not hold back in faulting the gov-

ernment in its handling of the restitution of farms.

"Lack of skills and capital are two of the main reasons why land reform projects fail. There also needs to be an investment of supporting infrastructure for things like fighting fires which are not available in rural areas where most of the small growers are based," said Rodger Godsmark, director of Forestry Africa.

Barry Gibbs, of the KZN Pork Producers' Association, said communal property associations needed to separate land ownership from the business of running a farm, which required appointment of directors and operating companies to keep the farms productive.

"In other cases you have too many people trying to live off a farm that was meant to sustain one or two families. That is highly unsustainable," he said.

Edsel Hohls, of the KZN Milk Producers Organisation, said new farmers would struggle in the industry because of the issues of a free market which remained unregulated and allowed for imports to "strangle" local produce with low prices.

He suggested introducing a school milk project and schools getting milk from new farmers so they could have a sustainable income.

His sentiments were echoed by other farmers who stressed to the government that it needed to establish new markets and regulate existing ones to create a gap for small growers.

The backdrop to this growing agricultural crisis was 6 346 new land claims lodged with the KZN Land Commission since the re-opening of the land claims process in June.

More claims were expected to be lodged before the deadline in June 2019.