



agriculture & rural development

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Passing on the science to small-scale farmers

OPINION

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AS MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development, I recently spent an enjoyable afternoon with a group of farmers who had completed a course in agro-meteorology.

Many of these small-scale farmers had little formal education but engaged enthusiastically with the science that looks at the effects of weather and atmospheric conditions on agriculture. They spoke easily on issues of climate change and what they had learnt.

The course was run by the South African Weather Service (Saws) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). It was piloted in the Free State and here in KwaZulu-Natal.

I was reminded of this initiative as the World Forestry Congress got under way in Durban last week. Discussions on climate change, forests, food security and the future sustainability of our planet took centre stage last week. It is good to know that South Africa has not been caught napping and that work is being done to train small-scale farmers on how to use weather and climate information to develop adaptation and mitigation strategies in their farming practices.

To many of us, the Weather Service is associated with the men and women

who tell us whether to expect rain or sunshine for the day. It is worth reminding ourselves that the service has a much broader sweep.

CEO of Saws Dr Linda Makuleni said that agro-meteorological services in developing countries such as South Africa have to bear greater responsibility due to changing agricultural practices, climate change, population pressure and demand for food security. According to Makuleni, the workshops were part of a project to ensure the dissemination of agro-meteorological information to enhance agricultural productivity.

For me, the workshops affirmed that the KZN Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Strategy for Agrarian Transformation is on the right track.

In the strategy, we make bold statements. We say that we aim to unleash the potential of small-scale farmers, and that the basis of the strategy is the fundamental recognition that farming is both a scientific and business enterprise. The agro-meteorology workshops demonstrated that farmers in the informal economy are open to the science, are willing to learn and bring in their own indigenous knowledge to engage in issues of climate change.

Faced with the current drought, one solution is to look at drought-tolerant crop varieties. However, there is also a need for the wise management of fertilisers, care of the soil, timing of cultivation and crop rotation. In other words, bio-resource management. The KZN depart-

ment has such a programme, which is also aimed at skilling small-scale farmers to help ensure the sustainability of their enterprises.

The department's extension officers also attended the agro-meteorology workshops and their work will be to pass on the information to other farmers. The department has been hard at work beefing up its extension services so that it has scientifically trained extension officers who will help teach farmers about new farming practices and keep them informed on advances in agriculture.

The International Forestry Congress, which was attended by a large number of delegates from the scientific community, offered insight into the powerful tools that are now being used in forestry and agriculture — these include geospatial mapping, predictive modelling, remote-sensing, the developments in the field of climate change and mobile technologies, to name a few. The challenge is to ensure that this knowledge does not remain in the domain of conference halls and academic journals, but is passed on to enhance the technical expertise of small-scale farmers.

To unleash the potential of our small-scale farmers, the science of agriculture has to be made accessible. As we discovered with the agro-meteorology workshop, there are eager learners hungry for this knowledge as they are determined to grow their farming enterprises.

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