

Thousands lose their jobs, 130 000 animals die in KZN drought

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KWAZULU-Natal's agriculture sector is in crisis as more than 8 000 workers have lost their jobs and about 130 000 animals are reported dead because of the worsening drought.

Sandy la Marque, the chief executive of provincial agriculture union Kwanalu, told its annual congress in Pietermaritzburg yesterday that 8 223 farmworkers in the sugar cane industry had lost their jobs and about 100 000 commercial sector farm animals were dead as a direct result of the drought, according to a recent count.

She said the drop-off in sugar cane production translated into R21 million a month in lost wages.

Lennox Mabaso, a spokesman for the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, said about 30 000 head of cattle had died from water and food shortages on communal and small-scale farms.

La Marque said the union had proposed a draft of solutions, but had heard nothing from the Department of Agriculture.

"We have been lobbying with the government for 18

months, warning them about the extent and growing crisis in the province. There seems to be little leadership on relief plans," she said.

The solutions included:

- Subsidised aid.
- Access to grazing on state land.
- Provision of a grant or wage subsidisation plan.
- Municipal property rates rebates.
- Tax concessions.
- Incentives on stock reduction.
- Financial bridging assistance.
- Subsidisation of interest

on production credit and long-term loans.

● Maintenance of water reticulation systems.

Mabaso said since the province had been declared a disaster area in March, R352 million had come from the national disaster fund and the Department of Water and Sanitation. This was far short of the R1.5 billion required to assist municipalities.

He said the funding was going towards buying water tankers and prospecting for additional borehole sites.

"Our focus is mainly on small-scale farmers," he said.

Cathy Hurley of the SA Canegrowers Association said the sugar cane farming industry would require at least R1 billion to get back on its feet.

"Many farmers are going to have to replant their fields."

She said the Darnall mill had closed because of the massive reduction in cane supply and the water supply to the Amatikulu mill had all but dried up.

The drought-affected crop had resulted in 34% less in cane tonnage delivered to the mills for the 2014/15 season. As a result many – particularly small-scale farmers – would

not be able to pay back their loans. "The effects will be felt long after the rains arrive," she said.

Hurley said a "risk management" meeting was scheduled at the South African Sugar Association headquarters north of Durban next week.

"We have to come up with plans that are not dependent on government support," she said.

Department of Agriculture spokesman Lelethu Manentsa referred The Mercury to the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, saying it was responsible for all drought relief efforts.