KAMADLOPHA-MTHETHWA AND INKOSI BUTHELEZI REQUIRE ENHANCED EXTENSION SERVICES FOR FARMER DEVELOPMENT

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's extension practitioners, the lifeblood of the sector, gathered at the Inkosi Albert Luthuli International Convention Centre for a two-day conference from 01 - 02 June 2026.

The Department's MEC, Mrs. Thembeni kaMadlopha-Mthethwa, has brought agricultural experts and policymakers together to discuss key issues facing agricultural extension. The discussions include evaluating the impact of droughts on smallholder farming, building farmer resilience through climate-smart agricultural trials to improve yields and food security, enhancing soil test utilization among small-scale farmers through extension training, and examining the vulnerability of household food insecurity through a case study on dependence on social grants.

MEC kaMadlopha-Mthethwa said there are too few extension officers for the number of farmers. "One extension officer often serves more than 1 000 farmers, which is the recommended ratio. According to the General Household Survey, the average in KwaZulu-Natal is one extension officer for every 1,610 farmers."

She urged the sector to adopt tech-savvy and sustainable farming practices to help reverse the effects of climate change, "The world is changing, and rainfall is no longer as predictable as it was before. If farming continues in the old way, livelihoods will be at risk. Extension services must lead in teaching sustainable farming methods to help farmers adapt and secure their future. We want to see our farmers not fearing the weather," said MEC KaMadlopha-Mthethwa.

The Department's guest keynote speaker, the Minister for the Department of Public Service and Administration, Inkosi Mzamo Buthelezi, who is also a former veterinary assistant, said extension practitioners have an important role to play in growing the sector. He added that they have a special responsibility to help small-scale farmers and the general public become self-sufficient and independent.

He cautioned that conferences with good intentions must produce tangible outcomes for farmers. "We have to move away from staging conferences year after year with well-articulated themes that lead to nothing. This one must produce great ideas that will be actioned further. Extension services are at the coalface of service delivery and are on the ground imparting critical expertise toward farmer development. We must guard against the notion that the more educated you are, the less effective you become," he said.

Inkosi Buthelezi also urged the department to ensure that districts experiencing extreme hunger, as highlighted in the General Household Survey – Zululand, uMkhanyakude, uMzinyathi, and Harry Gwala – have no families going to bed hungry. He said that these districts have large tracts of fertile land. "It is incomprehensible that these districts suffer severe hunger when the land is fertile and extension have to ensure that fertile lands contribute to food security. I am happy to learn that the department is working toward prioritising these areas," he said.

Extension and Advisory Services have been encouraged to put farmers' needs first and to visit farms more often. More frequent visits have been proven to improve both crop and livestock yields.

There have also been calls for the department to provide more support for growth and skills development, including training on modern farming methods. The department has been urged to recruit more extension officers to strengthen the service.








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