

South Africa faces food shortage

South Africa is facing the prospect of looming food shortages in the next 10 years as the country struggles to attract new talent to its ageing crop of commercial farmers, according to Deloitte.

Data from farming organisation Agri SA shows that the average age of a South African farmer is 62, considerably higher than the EU median age of 55 and also older than the US (58) and Australia (53,) a factor that is likely to put considerable pressure on the nation's status as a net food producer. Compounding this is the fact that South Africa, which is already battling a chronic electricity shortage, is considered semi-arid in most parts with a 2009 World Bank study estimating that just 11.82% of its 1,221,037 km² of land is arable.

"The average age of a commercial farmer in this country is around 62 and we're simply not attracting enough new farmers to the sector to fill the gap they are going to leave as they start to retire over the next decade," says Omri van Zyl, a Senior Associate at Deloitte.

"If you think the electricity shortage is an issue for the economy, just imagine what a food shortage would do. At least you can use a generator to produce electricity if there's a blackout but you can't do much if you don't have any food."

Agri SA data indicates that South Africa had 120,000 farmers in 1994 compared to 37 000 at present. This dwindling population of commercial farmers supports a population of over 50 million people, of which only 45.6% are considered food secure. Van Zyl says the country's commercial farmers, who are crucial to the supply of white maize to many of South Africa's neighbours, are simply not being replaced by younger entrants thanks to a combination of poor access to finance for emerging black farmers and a lack of interest from the younger generation.

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