

Citrus farmers in dire need of relief

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The government has been urged to help struggling citrus farmers in the Winterveld, an area regarded as one of the poorest in the Tshwane Metro.

The farmers operate under the auspices of the Winterveld Citrus Project (WCF), which is part of the Winterveld United Farmers Association (Wufa).

Dr Sam Motsuenyane, the WCF's chairperson, said in the organisation's annual report that in view of the severe drought which affected large parts of the country and the entire Winterveld area during the past year, the shortage of irrigation water was having an adverse effect on all farming activities in the area, especially the citrus orchards.

The WCF will have its third harvest at the Winterveld municipal offices this coming Saturday and it is expected that 20 tons will be yielded. The oranges will be carted for processing at the Magalies Citrus Company.

Motsuenyane - a former president of the National Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industries - said the provision of adequate water for irrigation constituted a major challenge for the citrus project.

"In addition to the water supply presently drawn from boreholes, some urgent attention needs to be focused on the harnessing of surface water from Toloane River, and also from run-off of the Kromkuil wetland, both of which have sufficient water running throughout the year," he added.

He said the department of Water Affairs had been consulted about this important development challenge to the project, "but has so far not responded".

Motsuenyane: "It is quite obvious that the development of agricultural activities in Winterveld and surrounding area must in the long run depend on the optimum utilisation of irrigation water that is available in the area.

"For this to happen, both the government and development organisations need to come closer to help the communities in this regard."

He said the drought was responsible not only for the reduced harvest expected this year, but also the generally poor quality of a number of citrus orchards in the area.

"The outbreak of veld fires has also destroyed some trees, where inadequate weeding and grass cutting was done.

"Along with the ill effects of the drought on the young citrus trees, there was also a widespread invasion on several individually-owned orchards by the red scale (virus) which caused some visible damage to the plants," said Motsuenyane.

In addition to the 25 new boreholes drilled and the repair of 11 dysfunctional ones, another three new boreholes were drilled during the year, two of which were funded by the Pick 'n Pay Foundation.

The foundation has undertaken not only to equip the 12 boreholes with pumps but also to pay for the cost of debushing 40ha and soil preparation on 15 plots that are to be used primarily for the production of vegetables to supply Pick 'n Pay stores in Soshanguve.

Motsuenyane said that apart from the provision of adequate irrigation water to the project, and the provision of suitable infrastructure on one of the plots - to serve as a central collection point - there were other essential requirements such as implements, machinery and vehicles without which farm work could not be operated smoothly and efficiently. "These include tractors, sprayers for the application of pesticides, insecticides or herbicides for pest, insect and weed control.

"We also need ploughs, trailers, a van and a vehicle for transporting oranges to and from the processing and packaging centre, and a washing, waxing and grading machine."

