

Govt clinches deal for smallholder farmers

Government's efforts to assist smallholder farmers to access markets are starting to bear fruit.



(Image: GCIS)

Following the Kingdom of Lesotho's alarming food security decline for the second year in a row, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson on Tuesday announced that government has secured a deal with the World Food Programme (WFP) to purchase maize from South African smallholder farmers for Lesotho.

The government of Lesotho declared an emergency food crisis and formally requested international assistance. South Africa, through the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), answered the call with a R180m donation.

"One of the conditions of this agreement from the South African government's side was that at least 40% of the white, non-GMO (genetically modified) maize must be purchased from smallholder farmers in South Africa," Joemat-Pettersson said.

The minister, who described the agreement as the biggest of its size for the agricultural sector, said the WFP was best suited to channel and distribute the food assistance.

The minister said this would translate to assisting 227,000 children, pregnant and lactating women, who were malnourished, to be food secure for a period of 22 months in the Kingdom's 10 districts.

She said when the WFP and her departmental officials audited the maize availability from smallholder farmers, they found that the country had surpassed their expectations.

The minister also announced that on the eve of Mandela International Day, they will harvest 35,000 tons of maize, led by President Jacob Zuma in Ngcingwana village in Dyutwa in the Eastern Cape, as part of her department's integrated

agricultural production programme.

"Some of the tons of maize that we will be harvesting with the President tomorrow have already been identified as part of the off-take agreement.

"It is for the first time smallholder farmers have produced such a huge quality export maize crop in this country. We have, for the first time in 100 years, produced 35,000 ha of maize, beans and potatoes.

"We've produced quality and quantity and have markets," Joemat-Pettersson said.

Boosting food security

The minister said while there were 12 million South Africans with poor access to food, South Africa was generally a food secure nation.

The country produces sufficient food for its population but skyrocketing prices prevent the poor - most of them in urban households - from getting adequate nutrition.

WFP executive director Ertharin Cousin said there was no better time to have a conversation about the future of smallholder farmers than on the eve of Mandela Day.

"The WFP is pleased to work with the South African government on this initiative to fight food insecurity in Lesotho and we are also pleased that 40% of the maize that we will get will be produced by smallholder farmers," she said.

Cousin said the WFP would supply commodities such as sugar beans, vegetable oil, sugar, canned fish, iodised salt and super cereal to Lesotho.

Integrated Agricultural Programme

President Zuma will at tomorrow's event launch the 1,000,000ha Integrated Food and Nutrition Security Initiative Plan for the 2013/14 crop season for all provinces.

This initiative is part of an extensive strategy aimed at supplementing the services rendered by provinces as a direct response to higher levels of household food insecurity in the country.

Through this initiative, government has managed to mobilise additional resources from different departments across all spheres of government and as a consequence, over 40,000ha of the underutilised agricultural land was put under production during the previous production season, with maize and beans being the main commodities.

The impact of the drought and later rains in the 2001/12 cropping season worsened an already vulnerable situation in rural Lesotho, following a poor harvest in 2011.

Crop forecasts showed that cereal production was the lowest in 10 years in Lesotho.