

VIRTUAL MINISTERIAL BRIEFING ON AGRICULTURE, LAND REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

MPUMALANGA PROVINCIAL PLANS TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AGRICULTURE, LAND REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT:

The following are the key noted impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Agricultural Sector and the broad response plans by the Department

1. Job losses due to scaled down operations on the farms due to Lockdown related restrictions:

Impact

The agricultural sector suffered an unintended consequence of scaled down operations due to the related restrictions of the lockdown such as social distancing, limited public transportation, and limitations on the provincial and regional borders.

The most heavily affected farms are those that are dependent on seasonal / migrant labor or sales, notably fruit and vegetable production, horticulture and garden nurseries.

The hospitality industry in one of the main markets for agricultural products and since it was closed many farmers could not sell their produce and had to shed jobs.

The scale down had much impact on farm solvency for all levels of the farming community including both crop and animal production farmers

Broad plans:

The Department will in both the short and long term focus on assisting the farmers to increase their production levels in particular by doing the following:

Upscale and broaden the implementation of the Zonda Indlala Programme (Zip) that ensures that every household plants some kind of a fruit or a nut tree. This is one of the innovative programmes that the Mpumalanga Agricultural sector devised to respond to increase in food security and directly and indirectly improve on the carbon foot print.

Through this programme many more households will actively take part in the value chain of processes like fruit drying and jamming, drying, and mango atchaar processing.

Upscale the production of grains from 12000 ha to 35 000 ha per YEAR. This will be made possible through collaboration with commodity associations, increased mechanization support in partnership with the commercial farmers and introduction of seed multiplication initiatives which will assist to avail more seeds to farmers to cover more land.

Focus on increasing vegetable production levels at an emerging to compensate for the increased and shortage of such at the local retail markets. For the short term, the Department has planned on providing 6 Vegetable projects with support of farm infrastructure and production inputs. The support will include in particular provision of boreholes, fencing, drip irrigation, and vegetable tunnels. Produce from these projects will also form part of the government based school nutrition programme under the Government Nutrition Programme. These contribute in increasing access, affordability and quality of fresh produce to the schools.

The Department will resume the NSF funded learnerships where 420 young farmers will benefit from the training as well as a stipend. In the short term will contribute to their livelihoods and long term their application of their acquired skills upscale their agricultural activities.

Expand the animal production development through MESP and collaborations with ARC on the Kaonofatso ya Dikgomo (KyD) which is a cattle production improvement programme. The Department is working on cattle breeding on the research farms and some of the farms that have been placed under the Fortune 40 projects to support cattle farmers with quality livestock.

Accelerate, in the medium to long term, allocation of land to farmers, bring identified hectares of state land and allocate it to crops and livestock farmers. This will be done in support of and or in partnership with Amakhosi on communal land starting with hectares identified by the House of Traditional Leaders. Focus is on expanding the production to ensure that all land that is laying fallow is turned into production units.

2. Restricted set of defined essential goods and services to households and increased percentage (%) on Essential Products Consumer Price Index:

Impact:



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Since the COVID-19 lockdown went into effect on 26 March, the range of products available to households for purchase was restricted to a set of defined essential goods and services. Many of our households found themselves unable to access the range of basic food essentials as these were either in short supply and or very expensive.

The Department was and has during this period been part of the essential institutions used to directly combat the effect of this pandemic on our communities and particularly the marginalized communities.

As part of the key strategy by the Province to respond to the impact, the Department was provided with additional funding for Covid-19 of R32 million to purchase and distribute food parcels guided by the Department of Social Development (DSD).

Broad Plans:

The Department noted that many more households have turned toward producing some vegetables to augment their basic food needs. These has led to an increase of households' access to vegetable seeds and or seedlings. Significant increase was also noted in the need of support by the Department from the households that have been adversely affected and impacted by the pandemic.

The Department has thus planned to increase implementation initiative of food gardens establishment and or support to combat hunger which is a sustainable way of food security as compared to provision of food parcels.

For the short to medium term, the Department has planned to focus on ensuring that 487 households are supported. These households will be provided with support to establish and / or maintain their food gardens. The support will be in a form of amongst others, agricultural technical advice, production inputs & starter packs, mentorships and training and also, surplus produce from these households will be channeled through the AgriHubs as part of the source of vegetable for the Government Nutrition Programme. These will in particular provide vegetable for the local schools, hospitals and any other local government sponsored food initiative programme.

The Province plans to sustain food production levels availability during the COVID crisis. On the short term, special attention will be on monitoring of food stocks and grains levels at the AgriHubs, Grains Mills, packhouses, etc.

3. Potential decline in demand locally and several traditional export markets leading to disinvestment and possible job losses:

Impact

The department has noted that the agricultural sector is likely to face “a potential decline in demand locally and from several traditional export markets, and thus by extension lower agricultural commodity prices. This, in turn, will weigh on farmers and agribusinesses’ finances and possibly the sentiment”. This is likely to negatively lead to increased disinvestment and job losses in the sector.

Broad Plans:

On medium to long term, the Province will create a comprehensive farmer support mechanism. This will include amongst others bringing to full operation the Mkhondo Agri-Hub. Initiate and finalize the feasibility study of the Nkangala and Nkomazi Agri-hubs. On the long term basis the Province plans to roll out and expand the agro-processing logistics by increasing the creation of more small and medium agribusinesses with special attention to attracting youth, women and persons with disabilities.

In the medium term the Province is focusing on the Dairy Plant development that is underway in the City of MBOMBELA. This will include ensuring that 9 grain mills in the districts are fully resuscitated and fully operationalized. The Dairy Plant will contribute to ensuring that the production capacity of the local dairy farmers increases in preparation for the supply the processing plant. In the medium, the Department is looking to supporting farmers to increase their production of dairy cattle to at least 6 000 to meet the demand of the planned dairy plant that will be producing a minimum of 150 000 litres of milk per day.

The Province is also focusing on sustaining support and upscaling the grain storages sites. The Province will also upscale the grain production to support the newly established Provincial Grain Mill in Middelburg. This is done in collaboration with the investor that will see more than 35 000ha of maize across the Province being processed.

At the emerging level the Province has in a short to medium term initiated the resuscitation of small scale Sorghum Grain Mill in particular the privately owned RAKS Milling in Dr. JS Moroka and MAV milling in City of Mbombela. These are in the process of being upgraded to commercial level.

The Department also plans to expand markets, improve market compliance and state capacity. The Department will identify strategic markets in Africa and the Middle East and secure market agreements for institutional markets. Consultations are ongoing with the Government sector departments to support these establishments with off take agreements.

4. Decreases the level of service delivery in terms of farmers support and Veterinary services as well as workforce on the farms.

Impact:

Decreased inspections, vaccinations of animals for diseases of economic and zoonotic importance leading to more prone to disease outbreaks. These were caused by reduction in animal turnover as a result of owners being scared of moving to the dipping and inspection points. The Department has also noted and recorded that older staff members (over 60 years) and staff with underlying medical conditions leading to officials staying at home as a recommendation. Noted also incidences of staff retired during Covid-19 and around.

In addition, in the beginning of lockdown there was a slight decrease in exports as a result of exporters having fewer resources to carry such activities. As lockdown conditions were eased there was a marked improvement in the exports. Officials are assisting all exporters to export their consignments

And lastly, the farmers and government staff initially struggled to find and utilize personal (PPE) to protect workers from COVID-19 infection. The effect of the lockdown had an indirect consequence impact of the staff and workforce at the farm level. Mpumalanga Province identified as mainly rural community with 47.1% of population and the majority of farms that are family farms where the workforce is aged and capital are already on site or drawn from their immediate rural localities and the same in with the workforce in the Department.

The Department has recorded an increasing number of officials that has declared being living with compromised health status impacted by the Covid-19.

Broad plans:

The Department had initiated plans that includes increase of the days for inspection and making follow ups to the homes of the farmers who do not attend at the dip tanks and inspection points. Decrease the number of days at the workstations as well as contact period. Ensure staff only perform critical services. Bolster staff through job stimulus package (newly availed). The Province will be paying special attention on filling the critical essential posts and bolster staff through job stimulus package (newly availed)

In addition, the Department is focusing on sustaining the viability of the farming sector. Amongst this is availing essential government services and inspections. Expand extension services and deployment of graduates.

In a short term develop systems that works in tendum with distance communication and interaction of farmers.

The department has on a short term plan to develop data systems to improve evidence based decisions. Improve research collaborations between the state and private. Strengthen the partnership with other research institutions such as the Mpumalanga University and the ARC research on crop & value chain innovations and adaptability to changing climate and work environment. Intensify the recognition of traditional and emerging farmer commodity groups

Staff available has been equipped with PPE to minimize the contraction of Covid-19 and are able to attend to essential services including cattle inspections, abattoir inspections, emergency clinical cases, animal vaccinations and other disease preventative programmes. To minimize the spread of the Covid-19, officials work from home to dip tanks, kraals, clinics, abattoirs, etc.

Less essential services that are exposing the officials to more risk are deferred. Where possible services are conducted remotely, e.g. over the phone or through electronic communication

To boost the current staff deficiencies a request for additional assistants under the presidential stimulus package has been put forward

And lastly, due to the current status of the Covid-19 conditions and its dynamics, export of animals and products are attended to on an individual appointment.

I THANK YOU