Sandveld water use: Industry prepares for potato price hike

By Koos du Pisanie, Plaas Media

South Africans should brace themselves for a potato price increase in the coming year. Last year, load shedding was responsible for a shocking 173% price hike, with an average long-term price increase from R42.87 to R72.92 for a 10 kg bag. FP Coetzee, Potatoes SA's manager of information and regional services, says this was the knock-on effect of a drastic reduction in potato production, with producers planting 1 600 fewer ha of potatoes last year due to load shedding.

Less water, fewer potatoes

The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) decided to reduce water use reserves in the Sandveld of the Western Cape by 30% to ensure sufficient water for the population and environment. Producers will therefore have 30% less water available for the cultivation of potatoes, vegetables and citrus.

A total of 57 potato producers currently cultivate 6 000 ha in the Sandveld. Dirk Uys, Potato SA's research and innovation manager, warned during a recent *Plaas/Farm TV* news bulletin that this decision by the department will cause havoc in the potato industry. With 30% less water, producers will likely plant 30% fewer potatoes, reducing the area planted to potatoes by approximately 2 100 ha. This reduction will lead to significant price increases for consumers, as was illustrated by the load shedding crisis.

Impact on the economy

Uys asserts that the actions of the DWS will have a big impact on local towns' economy and the socio-economic well-being of the residents in the area. The Sandveld is one of the few areas where potatoes are grown year-round. Producers plant an average of 6 000 ha annually and employ 6 000 workers. This decision will result in the loss of many jobs and lead to a reduction in the average household income.

Potatoes SA anticipates that the local government will lose tax and VAT revenue estimated at R300 million per year. Uys says that the DWS's claim that agriculture uses excessive water is also not scientifically substantiated. The drought from 2015 to 2002 contributed greatly to the decrease in water. While it is true that agriculture consumes a lot of water, it is essential for food production, and producers have always been responsible for their water usage, according to Uys.

Farming activity in the Sandveld has come under pressure since the 2015 drought, with unfounded allegations that water used for agriculture was the reason the Verlorenvlei, a Ramsar site, ran dry. Hydrogeologists within the DWS, however, showed that it was a natural consequence of the drought. The Verlorenvlei's water levels have recovered since 2022.

In a recent press release issued by Potatoes SA, Monique Vlok, chairperson of the Sandveld Potato Producers Association, said the outcry over the Verlorenvlei running dry was borne out of a perception that producers mine the earth and its resources. "We are as much concerned about unsustainable water use as anyone else. We therefore focus on sustainable practices that maximise water use efficiency."

Lowest water footprint

According to Willie Jacobs, CEO of Potatoes SA, data from the Water Footprint Calculator indicates that potatoes have the lowest water footprint among staple crops. They require 34 ℓ per 113 g portion, compared to 276 ℓ for the same amount of rice, 144 ℓ for maize and 182 ℓ for a portion of bread. In other words, potatoes present a sustainable option for water allocation, making the best use of resources to ensure food security.

Jacobs suggests that DWS should instead focus on more effective water management strategies, integrated water resource management, and provide training and capacity building for those involved in water management on potato farms. "These measures can achieve the desired ecological outcomes without the adverse effects on the potato industry and the broader community."

For more information, send an email to Dirk Uys at dirk@potatoes.co.za or FP Coetzee at fpcoetzee@potatoes.co.za.

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