

Black frost devastates Limpopo crops

By Rachichi Marokane, national transformation co-ordinator, Potatoes SA

The agricultural sector in Limpopo, particularly in the Capricorn and Waterberg districts, recently experienced significant setbacks due to an unusual cold front resulting in black frost. This rare weather phenomenon has severely affected many developing producers, including those participating in support programmes facilitated by Potatoes SA and the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development under the Community Economic Development (CED) programme.

Impact on the EDM

The enterprise development model (EDM) provides crucial support to developing producers, especially in terms of potato seed, fertilisers, and chemicals. This model aims to sustain and expand the agricultural activities of these producers. Potatoes SA,

in partnership with the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development through its CED programme, funded 16 projects in the Molemole and Blouberg municipalities within the Capricorn district.

This funding covered essential inputs and utilised different irrigation systems such as drip and pivot irrigation. However, the cold conditions forced producers to plant late in July and early August, which is relatively late for this area. This affected funding as producers suffered other cash crop losses as well that would have assisted in covering working capital costs such as fuel, electricity, labour, machinery hire, and packaging materials for potatoes.

Impact of black frost

The cold front and subsequent black frost during the last two weeks of June and the first two weeks of July caused unprecedented damage to crops in the region. Such conditions are rare for these areas, which typically do not experience severe frost. The impact was particularly significant for producers who planted between March and July, as the frost coincided with critical growth stages for many crops.

Producers in the Blouberg municipal region were on the verge of harvesting when frost struck, almost wiping out their crops. In Molemole, a second-year participant in the EDP saw his almost-ready crops partially affected. Cecilia Mamabolo, a new producer in the Radium area of the Waterberg district, faced challenges with frozen irrigation systems but managed to mitigate significant losses through external support.

Meanwhile, other developing producers planting on relatively smaller scales of 1 to 3ha expressed concerns regarding continuing potato production due to the recent black

frost impact. In the Vhembe district, Walter Mathidi of Vivo lost his entire 17ha crop and is considering cutting labour costs to maintain liquidity.

Assessment and mitigation

A preliminary assessment confirmed the extensive damage caused by the frost, which affected especially producers who planted in mid-May. However, support systems and timely interventions helped mitigate the overall impact. On 19 July, a member of the executive council, Nakedi Kekana, visited Blouberg to monitor the effects of the frost and engage with severely affected producers. The visit underscored the importance of government involvement in assessing and addressing the impact of such adverse weather conditions on the agricultural community.

The recent conditions have highlighted the vulnerabilities of the agricultural sector in Limpopo. While the enterprise development model and support from the Department and Potatoes SA have provided a safety net, the unusual weather patterns nevertheless underscore the need for adaptive strategies and robust risk management practices.

Continuous support, timely planting advisories, and investment in resilient agricultural practices is essential for safeguarding the livelihoods of developing producers in the region. It is crucial to conduct a thorough assessment of losses to present a realistic picture rather than a hybrid one. Understanding the market impact caused by such frost and calculating the losses accurately are imperative for future planning and support strategies. 🍎

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A crop affected by black frost on a farm in the Blouberg municipal region.

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