

The potential of potatoes in South Africa

By Willie Jacobs, CEO, Potatoes SA

This preface was written while I was attending the World Potato Congress in Australia, where I gradually came to realise the true capacity of the South African potato producer. Quite a number of issues discussed at the congress related to generic problems arising from the most common pests and diseases occurring in potatoes globally. It became clear, though, that South Africa stands out as one of the highest-yielding countries worldwide, judging by yield per hectare.

Seed quality and availability were high on the congress agenda with bacterial wilt, blackleg or soft rot (*Erwinia*), late blight and tuber moth proving to be the major yield and quality influencers.

Listening to the issues at hand, I simply had to formulate a list of what sets our producers apart from the rest.

South Africa's success recipe

- The commercial mindset of our producers is of entrepreneurs whose product is aimed at achieving the highest sales value at any given time.
- Our producers own up to their conditions, bringing a solution-driven attitude to agricultural production.
- South Africa benefits from a solid seed industry, allowing for the capacity to have plant-ready materials available so that we can have fresh potatoes on the shelf every day.

- Excellent quality is assured, both in seed and commercial deliveries.
- Our interactive agro-chemical industry and crop input solutions are in tune with the challenges that producers face.
- Interactive market agent support can create swift responsiveness to pricing changes. However, this needs to be managed, because it also drives pricing volatility and resultant buffering in downstream transactions.
- Trading facilities that provide critical mass at the off-taker level, enabling the system to contain true price discovery. We have not come across similar-scale trade environments.

Levelling the playing field

This all begs the question: What can we do to improve the competitiveness of the South African producer on the world stage?


Firstly, let us acknowledge that the average potato producer in South Africa already ranks in the top 20% globally in terms of quality and yield. This means that any enhancement of productivity beyond this level will be extremely difficult to adopt, and the cost and risk barriers to entry are high.

The focus of Potatoes SA and its producers should be on further yield improvements at reduced cost. This, alongside the opening of marketing opportunities, should enable us to be among the top 20 potato-producing countries in the world. In order to do this, a few things must be in place.

Practical steps

We need to enhance our capacity to align production practices with the productive capacity of the field, especially in respect of variations in yield, nutrients and water requirements. This can only be achieved by setting up and utilising interactive monitoring systems and recording production progress and results. This data should be the starting point for each new crop, linking available resources with the planned process, thus optimising seasonal inputs. The same should apply to chemical applications, using proactive monitoring systems and spot applications to improve chemical efficiency.

Potatoes SA recognises the importance of supporting the value enhancement of quality potatoes. There is a significant volume of higher quality potatoes than the local market can accommodate or recognise. This product should find its way to overseas markets, thus improving the profitability of producers of quality product, while not adding to the burden of local consumers. At the lower quality end, we should work on alternative uses to create value for generally discarded products.

Combined, the aforementioned initiatives could significantly enhance the value proposition of potato production, ensuring that our producers remain on their farms, and that potatoes are positioned as a priority crop in our country. 

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