

Mondstuk van die Suid-Afrikaanse aartappelbedryf • Mouthpiece of the South African potato industry

# CHIPS

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**SUIDWES-VRYSTAATSE KULTIVARPROEF  
ONDER BESPROEING  
OP PETRUSBURG IN 2021**

**CULTIVATING QUALITY:  
TOP TEN SEED POTATO GROWERS  
AWARDED FOR EXCELLENCE**

Beheer van virussiektes:  
Makliker gesê as gedaan

PSA expands small farmer  
development projects

Rising input costs:  
Farm profitability faces perfect storm

# Planting the first potato crop at Mashemong a Molemole Co-operative

By Rachichi Marokane, Potatoes SA

**T**owards the northern part of Limpopo near the Soutpansberg mountains is the Molemole Local Municipality, classified as a savannah biome which, among others, is suitable for livestock and vegetable production. While the Molemole Local Economic Development Strategy regards the municipality as highly reliant on the agricultural sector for its economy – contributing 14% – there are key areas of intervention for sectorial transformation.

One such intervention is the Mashemong a Molemole Co-operative, which formed part of the Land Reform Programme of what was formerly known as the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform. The beneficiaries, all youths, were allocated a portion of land that is well situated in the potato belt.

After Potatoes SA (PSA) conducted an extensive feasibility study followed by a bankable business plan exercise that benchmarked the viability of potato farming, the project was funded for infrastructural development, refurbishments, and procurement of implements and inputs. Working capital was also provided for operational activities before the first harvest.

## The co-operative team

With a primary aim of addressing unemployment and participation of the youth in primary agriculture and agro-processing, Mashemong a Molemole recruited six members who are all agricultural graduates:

- Ramarumo Refiloe: animal production.
- Makgobatlou Modjadji: animal production.

- Seima Moyahabo: animal production.
- Matshala Oskin: animal and plant production.
- Macheru Mohale: agricultural management.
- Tsiri Rakodi: agricultural management.

## Cultivating the first potato crop

In the northern part of Limpopo, potatoes are mainly planted in March and June. Severe frost during July which adversely affects potato plants, and potential excessive rainfall in December that could delay harvesting, are the main factors determining the time of planting. As such, the first week of June saw the project planting its first 7.5 ha under pivot irrigation.

Although the beneficiaries have been at the centre of the implementation process, technical assistance from mentors assigned by PSA and VKB has contributed to the excellent cultivation of potatoes.

A decent chemical application and fertiliser programme has also been developed.

Apart from a functioning centre pivot receiving water from two boreholes equipped with submerged water pumps, there is also an integrated mechanisation plan for timeous field preparation, planting, chemical application and harvesting.

## Partnering for success

Commodity organisations are increasingly becoming a strategic go-to in terms of interest in agricultural enterprise development and support in South Africa. Apart from effective implementation and monitoring capabilities, a thorough understanding of prospective crops is an advantage. An effective partnership that took notice of the potential of the Mashemong a Molemole Co-operative was that of the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), and PSA.





*Although this project offers a learning curve to the beneficiaries, a commercial approach is still necessary going forward. As such, expansion plans are being considered to archive economies of scale.*

The ongoing partnership has seen a significant number of potato projects being developed. With a team of strategic experts and technical advisors assigned by both DALRRD and PSA, the beneficiaries have managed to gain a primary understanding of commercial potato production.

### Understanding the basics

Crop rotation in potato production is vital for retaining substantial yields that are free from pests and diseases. With this in mind, Mashemong a Molemole beneficiaries put the necessary plans in place for the upcoming season. Once the potatoes have been harvested, other suitable cover crops will be planted to reduce the build-up of nematodes.

As emphasised by Pieter van der Merwe, VKB technical advisor, it is important to retain consistent moisture during potato production. With planting taking place in the middle of winter, relatively low levels of irrigation will be applied in the first two months due to low evaporation. As spring and summer approach, irrigation will be augmented due to increased evaporation.

### Offtake agreement planning

For any farmer an ideal scenario would be to have a crop contracted under a specific offtake agreement for security of supply and a predetermined

minimum price. With potatoes being the most consumed vegetable in the country, both formal and informal marketing channels are liquid.

With six months before harvesting takes place, the beneficiaries plan on finding a suitable market for their potatoes with the inland municipal fresh produce markets high on the cards. With the majority of farmers in the area planting during June, supply will no doubt be higher along with relatively lower prices. However, operating under these free-market conditions means the co-operative must differentiate itself through quality.

Control of potato tuber moth, among others, is highly prioritised at all stages of production as this could lead to detrimental yield losses. With Mondial proving to be more resistant to diseases and yielding higher tonnage, significant economic returns are anticipated on this fully funded project. Although this project offers a learning curve for the beneficiaries, a commercial approach is still necessary going forward. As such, expansion plans are being considered to archive economies of scale. 🍌

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