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Progress and growth in KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape

The potato-producing regions of KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape are abuzz with agricultural activities and initiatives, signalling a strong commitment to progress and growth in those farming communities.

In the Northern Cape, officials have undertaken packhouse visits to engage with potato producers directly. This hands-on approach has not only provided valuable feedback on individual farm performance but has also strengthened the bond between producers and agricultural authorities. The recent general meeting highlighted the region's dedication to inclusivity, as efforts are being made to encourage more producers to actively participate in shaping the region's agricultural future. Moreover, anticipation is building for the upcoming trial, which promises to be an enlightening experience, showcasing best practices and innovative techniques that will benefit local producers immensely.

Meanwhile, in KwaZulu-Natal, a spirit of camaraderie and knowledge-sharing is prevalent among producers. Personal introductions and involvement in the trial event at Greytown, led by Damien da Cal, have contributed to a sense of unity and co-operation within the agricultural community. The multifaceted approach to farming in the region is evident, with some producers still reaping their harvest, while others are planting and diligently planning for the months of September and October.

The recently held annual general meeting provided a platform for producers and stakeholders to engage in comprehensive discussions, fostering collaborative decision-making for the region's agricultural prosperity. The establishment of WhatsApp groups is another testament to the region's commitment to enhanced communication and involvement. Regional meetings are being organised to ensure that all stakeholders are actively participating in shaping the agricultural landscape. – *GP Heppell, Potatoes SA*

Two new appointments at Syngenta

Seed company Syngenta kicked off Women's Month with two new appointments. World-renowned nematologist, Prof Driekie Fourie, joined Syngenta as the technical product lead for Seedcare, which includes seed-treated biologicals, bio-stimulants, fungicides, insecticides and nematicides.

Armed with a passion for agricultural science and a doctorate in nematology from the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium, she has dedicated her career – which commenced in 1991 at the Agricultural Research Council-Grain Crops – to studying nematodes and their impact on crop health. Since 2010 she continued her research on nematode ecology, host plant resistance and the evaluation of eco-friendly, integrated pest management strategies to combat plant-parasitic nematodes at North-West University.

Syngenta was also delighted to announce the appointment of Yolandi Furniss as its Seedcare marketing lead for South Africa. Seedcare is the portfolio of Syngenta technologies that protects and enhances the performance of field crops, vegetables and ornamental seeds. The portfolio also contains products that stimulate growth, protect emerging crops from environmental stresses and help the seedlings to process nutrients and water more efficiently. – *Press release, Syngenta*

Food inflation slows down

South Africa's consumer food inflation slowed in June 2023, having been recorded at 11.1 from 12% in the previous month. The product prices underpinning this deceleration are mainly bread and cereals, meat, fish, milk, eggs and cheese, and oils and fats.

There are renewed risks in global agriculture. These include India threatening to ban rice exports and the termination of the Black Sea grain deal initiative that facilitated grain and oilseeds exports from Ukraine. We are still positive that South Africa's consumer food inflation will continue to slow during the second half of the year. – *Wandile Sihlobo, Agbiz*

Forum to combat PCN threat in Britain

In a significant move to safeguard the United Kingdom's potato industry, a new forum has been launched to tackle the growing menace of the potato cyst nematode (PCN), as Fred Searle reports for Fresh Produce Journal (Fruitnet).

The initiative, a joint venture between GB Potatoes and the Cambridge University Potato Growers Research Association (CUPGRA), seeks to unify efforts across the potato sector.

The forum's agenda is broad, encompassing past and present research, the breeding of PCN-resistant potato varieties, and the exploration of innovative control methods. A workshop held earlier this year at CUPGRA saw representatives from all facets of the industry come together, highlighting the urgent need for a co-ordinated approach.

Mark Taylor, chair of GB Potatoes, emphasised the gravity of the situation, stating: "Without a unified strategy, the potato sector faces a severe threat. It is crucial for the industry to come together and address this issue head-on."

With almost half of the wasteland in England and Wales already infected by PCN, the forum's establishment marks a pivotal step in the fight against this formidable pest. The area infested with PCN is doubling every seven years in Scotland. – *Potato News Today*

Yields soar with new fertiliser formula

In a groundbreaking study conducted by Egypt's Mansoura University, researchers discovered that fertilisers rich in calcium, magnesium and zinc can significantly boost the growth of potatoes and other tubers. The research, recently published in the *Journal of Plant Production*, was led by MKF El-Tawashy.

As Brand Spur in Nigeria reports in this news article, the study specifically tested the effects of two BRANDT products on potato growth. Results showed that the foliar application of these fertilisers, especially on newly reclaimed soil, considerably increased potato yields in both size and weight. Furthermore, the research highlighted the importance of using the right fertilisers and application techniques, which can help in reducing costs related to inefficient fertilisation methods. The study also found that these mineral-rich fertilisers not only stimulate plant growth but also increase the overall chlorophyll content, enhancing the marketability of the produce. – *Potato News Today*

A new subcategory of plant-based milks

Vegconomist.com first reported on Sweden's DUG potato milk in 2021. This was the first-to-market plant milk using half the amount of land of oat milk and 56 times less water than almond milk.

It all started when Prof Eva Tornberg of the University of Lund in Sweden was completing an assignment for the starch industry. She discovered the unique qualities and intriguing benefits of potato protein, realising that potato protein has an excellent amino acid profile, which is exceptional for a vegetable protein source. She founded Veg of Lund in 2016 – DUG Drinks' parent company – which launched DUG® in 2021 in Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Prof Tornberg developed a unique, patented method for producing a heat-stable, vegan emulsion made from potatoes and rapeseed oil, which forms the basis of all Veg of Lund innovation, including DUG plant-based dairy alternatives. Additionally, potatoes have the advantage of offering a very subtle neutral taste, are a great source of vitamins and minerals, and benefit from being free from the most common allergens, which makes it ideal for those with allergies or intolerances. – *Vegconomist.com*

Agricultural employment up, says Stats SA

Data released recently by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) paints an encouraging picture regarding agricultural employment. In the second quarter of 2023, approximately 894 000 people were employed in primary agriculture, up 1% quarter-on-quarter and 2% year-on-year.

This is the highest farming employment level since the last quarter of 2016 and is well above the long-term agricultural employment figure of 780 000. From a regional perspective, the Western, Eastern, and Northern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal were the significant drivers of this employment.

The robust production conditions of various field crops, forestry and aquaculture were behind the improvement in agricultural jobs in the second quarter. Meanwhile, the livestock industry saw modest improvement, which is unsurprising since the industry is still dealing with the tail-end effects of the foot-and-mouth disease period and higher feed costs. There also was a notable decline in the game industry and production of organic fertilisers.


– *Wandile Sihlobo, Agbiz*

Production practices in the spotlight

The Chair in Plant Health at Stellenbosch University will be presenting a course on potato crop production and cultivation practices in September this year. The course will be presented by Prof Martin Steyn of the University of Pretoria. Prof Steyn specialises in potatoes and his research is mainly focussed on the agronomy and water requirements of field crop and medicinal plants. He is also the processing editor of the agronomy section of the scientific journal, *Potato Research*.

Presentation type: In person • **Price:** R5 000 per person

Date: 20 and 21 September 2023 • **To register,** contact Lorette de Villiers at lorette@sun.ac.za or 082 921 1945

Online registration: shortcourses.sun.ac.za/register/?offeringid=5f55886f-3a35-ee11-abff-005056801c40 



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VOL 37 NO 5 • SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2023



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