

Successful 2024 congress paves the way for 2025

By Hugo Lochner, Plaas Media

This year's Potatoes SA Congress and Seed Potato Growers' Forum held at Century City in Cape Town, was well-attended and the discussions and presentations offered excellent food for thought. This year's theme, "2050 is now", was tackled from various angles ranging from technology and risk management, to hands-on production issues and embracing innovation.

The first session on 16 July started with a parallel session for input suppliers with an official welcome extended by Gert Bester, the chairperson of Potatoes SA. In his opening he referred to the fact that farming conditions have become more difficult for producers and that support is needed in order for them to continue producing.

Gerhard Posthumus, forum chairperson, opened the Seed Potato Growers' Forum for delegates and producers, which was held simultaneously in another hall.

Data makes the world go round

In his address during the parallel industry session, Willie Jacobs, chief executive officer of Potatoes SA,

said it is crucial that role-players in the potato value chain work together. "Let's get to a point where we are comfortable that data sharing is the next information base, the next power base. We have to be able to work with the information that we have," Jacobs added.

Some 46% of South African potatoes are traded via the fresh produce markets, said FP Coetzee, manager of industry information at Potatoes SA. Coetzee provided industry insights during the parallel session and, among others, mentioned that the highest price fetched for potatoes is based on these potatoes going directly to the market.

Efficiency and profitability are musts in order for the local potato industry to grow, stated Dirk Uys, manager of research and innovation at Potatoes SA. To keep producers



Murray Thompson was elected as chairperson of Potatoes SA. Thompson was the 2022 Syngenta National Potato Producer of the Year.

on their farms they have to produce more than 48.5 tonne/ha to break even. "We need access to global innovation, and we need to share and use data," he said.

Loffie Brandt, head of sales enablement at Absa Agribusiness, emphasised that the use of data partnerships is becoming very important.



From the left are Pieter Möller, motivational speaker and programme director of the congress, Loffie Brandt, head of sales enablement at Absa Agribusiness, and Dirk Uys, manager of research and innovation at Potatoes SA.



From the left are Gert Bester, outgoing chairperson of Potatoes SA, Willie Jacobs, chief executive officer of Potatoes SA, and Gerhard Posthumus, chairperson of the Seed Potato Growers' Forum.



From the left are Janco Cloete, technical marketing specialist of crop protection at IntelliGro, Janet Lawless, technical and national marketing manager at IntelliGro, and Willie Jacobs, chief executive officer of Potatoes SA.



William Sears, chief commercial officer at DP World SA, addressed some of the macro trends producers have to consider when planning for the future.



Martin Steyn, professor of agronomy in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Pretoria. Prof Steyn discussed the issue of agronomic efficiency.



Bernhardt du Toit, chairperson of the risk and audit committee at Potatoes SA, presented the audit committee report as part of the formalities of the congress.



Pieter Geldenhuys, director of the Institute for Technology Strategy and Innovation, spoke about factors that drive innovation.

All producers generate data and it is important for them to own that data. Brandt added that integrating the captured data into a bank's system would, however, be quite a challenge.

Martin Steyn, professor of agronomy in the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Pretoria, said that carbon dioxide (CO₂) has a positive effect on potato yields. Higher temperatures will cause

more heat stress and suppress yields, yet the combined effect of elevated temperature plus CO₂ will result in better potato growth and yields.

Mitigating risk

The second session started with a talk by Bernhardt du Toit, chairperson of Potatoes SA's risk and audit committee. Du Toit said that the risks involving potato production requires

an in-depth look, which is one of the tasks of the audit committee. "For me, one of the biggest risks is the survival of Potatoes SA. The value that the organisation brings to the potato industry must be retained. We'll have to think out of the box," he added.

William Sears, chief commercial officer of DP World SA, one of the sponsors of the congress, said the future is causing a lot of uncertainty and anxiety but that producers are quite familiar with this. When one looks to the future, there are certain key macro trends that producers have to consider. These trends include the rise of artificial intelligence or AI, changes in population demographics, climate change, green logistics, and green solutions to problems that were previously ignored.

Setting the table

The first day of the congress concluded with a panel discussion focussed on forward-thinking topics and solutions for the potato industry and beyond. Janet Lawless, technical and national marketing manager at IntelliGro and the facilitator of the session, introduced the speakers and indicated that the discussion would address topics such as technology advancement, crop protection, new breeding technologies, and global predictions. The panel discussion served as a scene setter for the panel discussions on day two of the congress.

Pieter Geldenhuys, director of the Institute for Technology Strategy and Innovation and one of the panel



Bernhardt du Toit, chairperson of the risk and audit committee at Potatoes SA, and Pieter Brink, manager of agricultural services and research at Yara South Africa.



Chris Pienaar, head of Global Fruit and Vegetable Incubator - Digital Farming Solutions at Bayer, emphasised the importance of adopting technology at farm level.



Sanette Thiar, former managing director of the Potato Certification Service, was awarded the *Solanum Tuberosum Meritum Award*. (Photograph: Silver Dune Photography)

members, said the three things driving innovation are scarcity, a sense of urgency, and a shift in perspective. "We need to think of new ways to solve our problems. Waiting is not an option. We live in an era of urgency. We have to use new technologies to harvest the wonderful opportunities that exist out there."

William Sears, chief commercial officer of DP World SA, said that we rely on food security to be a functional society. "This is something that we should not underestimate. At the same time, producers shouldn't underestimate how technology could change their world."

Chris Pienaar, head of the Global Fruit and Vegetable Incubator – Digital Farming Solutions at Bayer Crop Science, said that given our vision of regenerative agriculture, technology will continue to speed up. "The biggest challenge is adopting those technologies on the farm. It's not about the technology, but about the change producers are prepared to drive in their operations."

The future is already here

Dr Hennie Groenewald, CEO of Biosafety Africa, said development in the potato industry is based on DNA and genetics. It is the blueprint of the industry. "We need to invest in innovation, and create an environment that enables innovation. When innovation presents itself,



The Syngenta National Potato Farmer of the Year 2024 is Pierré Smit of HP Smit en Seuns of Taaboskraal near Piketberg in the Western Cape. From the left are Louw and Louise Maré Smit, Christel and Pierré Smit, and Mariaan and Johan Smit. (Photograph: Silver Dune Photography)



The Bayer Seed Potato Grower of the Year 2024 is Rudi Heinlein of Sirkel-N-Landgoed near Baltimore in Limpopo. Heinlein's sons, Gerhard and Nikus, accepted the award on his behalf. From the left are Theresa and Gerhard Heinlein, Nikus and Melisa Heinlein, Gerhard Posthumus, chairperson of the Seed Potato Growers' Forum, Murray Thompson, newly elected chairperson of Potatoes SA, Willie Jacobs, chief executive officer of Potatoes SA, and Wilbri Vorster, Horticulture Go-to Market (GTM) lead for Africa, Bayer Crop Science. (Photograph: Silver Dune Photography)

you should be prepared to embrace it," he said.

Murray Thompson, a seed and commercial potato grower, 2022 Syngenta National Potato Producer of the Year, and newly elected chairperson of Potatoes SA, said the future is already here.

Every production area within South Africa is a leader in a specific aspect of potato farming. "What we need to do to live in the future and to adopt all these great new technologies, is to talk to each other in order to share information, ideas, and strategies," he concluded.



Wesgrow was awarded the 2024 Seed Potato Supplier of the Year Award. From the left are Ettiëne Groenewald, marketer KwaZulu-Natal/Eastern Cape, Walter Nel, production manager, Dirk Pretorius, marketer Western and Eastern Free State, Llewellyn Tiller, coldroom manager, Riaan van Rooyen, financial manager, Chris Prinsloo, marketer Limpopo, Charl Nel, marketing national and exports, Gerhard Posthumus, managing director, David Steyn, operational director, and Heindrich Steyn, chemicals expert.



Wouter van Amstel (left) receiving the *Solanum Tuberosum Meritum* Award from Murray Thompson and Willie Jacobs. (Photograph: Silver Dune Photography)



Rudi Heinlein received the *Solanum Tuberosum Meritum* Award for excellent performance. Here are Nikus and Gerhard Heinlein with the award. (Photograph: Silver Dune Photography)

Production efficiency is key

The second day of the Potatoes SA Congress and Seed Potato Growers' Forum shined the spotlight on efficiency in potato production. A panel of speakers discussed soil, climate, and fertiliser related matters.

The facilitator of the panel discussion, independent communication specialist Lindi Botha, opened the discussion by stating that potatoes have the lowest water footprint of all staple foods in the world, especially compared to rice, wheat, and maize. Hence, there should be a bigger drive to increase potato production and generate valuable information when approaching government for assistance.

Prof Martin Steyn emphasised the fact that producers should take care not to over-fertilise their potato fields. Plants can absorb only so many nutrients from fertilisers. In addition, the absorption efficiency of specific nutrients differ quite a lot for potatoes. For example, nitrogen absorption is 60 to 70%, while phosphorus absorption is 30 to 40%.

Prof Stephanie Midgley, a specialist scientist in the Western Cape Department of Agriculture's Climate

Change division, said the drive for efficiency must go hand-in-hand with data-keeping and databases to refer to. "Know and understand what happens beneath the soil and in your region's climate. Integrate those aspects into your farm data system, but also as a region. That will drive efficiency," she said.

Manage the manageable aspects


Alan Bender, technical commercial co-ordinator for sub-Saharan Africa at Cosmocel, said producers must understand what limiting factors are involved before planting a crop. "If we are able to manage stress in plants, we can manage better production. We have to increase efficiency and prime the plant to better tolerate these limiting factors," he said.

Dr André Meiring, a potato producer from the Free State, said there are a number of manageable factors on a potato farm; however, there are also factors beyond the producer's control that they tend to handle in a reactive manner. "We have to look at the overall risk management strategy for the farm in order to manage all factors so as to improve efficiency," Dr Meiring said.

Various other panel sessions focussed on important issues such as logistics, customer/consumer issues, biosecurity and sustainability. To watch these sessions, visit www.potatoes.co.za/multimedia/.

Top producers honoured

The Potatoes SA Congress and Seed Potato Growers' Forum concluded with a gala function during which the Bayer Seed Potato Grower of the Year 2024 and the Syngenta National Potato Farmer of the Year 2024 were announced. This year, the honours went to Rudi Heinlein of Sirkel-N-Landgoed near Baltimore in Limpopo and Pierré Smit of HP Smit en Seuns of Taaboskraal near Piketberg in the Western Cape, respectively. Read our article on these exceptional producers in this issue of *CHIPS*.

Various other awards were also made. Wesgrow was awarded seed potato supplier of the year, and *Solanum Tuberosum Meritum* Awards for excellence were made to Sanette Thiar, Rudi Heinlein, and Wouter van Amstel. This award is conferred on individuals or organisations who, by means of their excellent performance, make an exceptional contribution to the success of the potato industry in striving to play a leadership role in sustainable potato production in South Africa. The recipients were honoured by the potato industry for their sustained performance and devotion in the interest of all role-players. 

Sponsors and exhibitors

The sponsors of this year's congress and forum were: DP World (main sponsor), Syngenta (National Potato Farmer of the Year), Bayer (Seed Potato Grower of the Year), Absa, Corteva Agriscience, Villa, and InteliGro (all platinum sponsors), Wesgrow (double-gold sponsor), AECl, GWK, SQM, and the Western Cape Government (all gold sponsors).

The session sponsors were Adama, Cosmocel, Corteva Biologicals, InteliGro, PepsiCo South Africa, and RSA Group. Participating sponsors were Africa Transport Solutions (ATS), CHEP, FMC, FPD Seed Potatoes, Grow, and SF.

Exhibitors at this year's event included AECl, Andermatt Madumbi, Cosmocel, DC Geomatics, DP World, Dux Agri, GWK, Metos, Netafim, New Holland, SQM, Syngenta, Valley, Villa, Patho Solutions, and Yara.

For more information on this year's and future events, email hanrie@potatoes.co.za.

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