

World Food Day 2024: Focus on the Sandveld

Supplied by Potatoes SA

Despite being an agricultural powerhouse, over 20% of South Africa's population is food insecure. This year, after Potatoes SA commemorated World Food Day on 16 October, we look at challenges that hinder food security. Effective natural resource allocation and management are regarded as key factors that will either promote or hinder food security.

"In a world where water is becoming scarce, and rainfall patterns are erratic and often destructive, we require a concerted effort to ensure that our resources are used in a way that solves hunger," said Willie Jacobs, CEO of Potatoes SA. He noted that climate change has had a monumental impact on rural economies and food production this year. Ensuring that no one goes to bed hungry in future will require greater collaboration between scientists, producers and policymakers on how our natural resources will be managed and allocated.

More than just a staple

This year's theme of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's World Food Day was "Right to foods for a better life and a better future". This theme underscores the importance of nutrient-dense, available, fresh and affordable food. Jacobs believes that potatoes tick all these boxes. Not only are they nutritionally valuable, but they are also produced year-round in South Africa, making optimal use of natural resources. Sustainable production systems should therefore be supported.

Potatoes are more nutrient-dense than many other staple foods in South Africa. They are high in carbohydrates, naturally fat-free,

and very low in sodium. Potatoes are also rich in mineral chromium and have the highest potassium levels compared to other vegetables and starchy foods. Potassium is a crucial mineral in our diets since it helps move nutrients into cells and waste products out, reduces blood pressure and water retention, and aids proper kidney and heart function.

The Sandveld's vital role

South Africa currently produces 2.5 million tonnes of potatoes annually, with 17% coming from the Sandveld region of the Western Cape. This 17% has a disproportionately large impact on potato availability and prices in South Africa because it is the only region that can produce potatoes year-round. It also supplies the majority of potatoes consumed in the Western Cape, as the nearest potato production region is 700 km away.

Given that the Western Cape is expected to face drier years due to climate change, it is prudent that any consideration for water allocation take the importance of continued potato production into account. Earlier this year, the Department of Water and Sanitation proposed cutting water allocations for agriculture in the Sandveld by 30%, which would result in 30% of the hectares under potato cultivation being taken out of production.


Monique Vlok, chairperson of the Sandveld Potato Growers Association, said that the role of water in achieving a sustainable future is acutely felt in the Sandveld. "Tackling the greatest challenges of our time starts with water. This includes food security. Sandveld potato production is vital for the region's economy and our ability to put food on our own tables. Any reduction in production will mean higher prices for potatoes across

South Africa due to lower supply. We therefore need sustainable solutions for water use to ensure food security across the country."

Producers in this region are doing their part to maximise every drop of water. By using advanced irrigation techniques and careful water management practices, producers in the Sandveld have reduced water usage by 20% over the last ten years while increasing yields. Improved genetics and management practices are also continuously employed to maximise yields while minimising inputs.

Water and food security

Vlok noted that South Africa's food security hinges on its ability to effectively manage water to ensure that food crops flourish and that every drop produces value. "Potato farming in the Sandveld is uniquely suited to the region's environment. The sandy soils, coupled with the moderate climate create ideal conditions for growing potatoes. Potatoes are a water-efficient crop when compared to other staple foods. By focussing on potato production, the Sandveld makes the most of its limited water supplies, ensuring that every drop is used to its maximum potential."

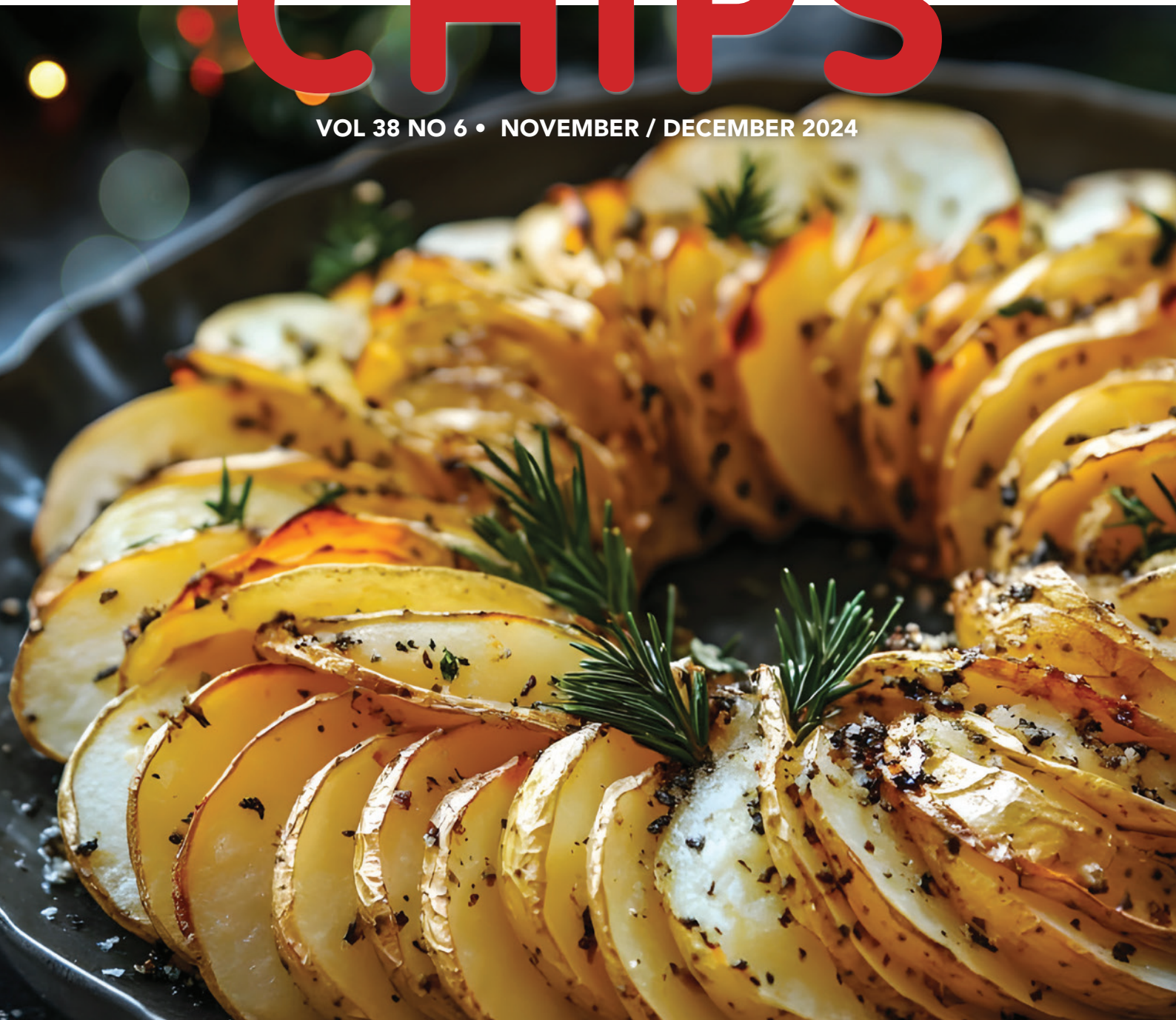
Potatoes have proven their worth in a country still striving for total food security. They are a staple food for many South Africans, providing essential nutrients and forming a key part of the diet. Ensuring the continued production of this crop in the Sandveld is crucial for maintaining an affordable supply for the nation and moving one step closer to food security. 

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