

Organised agriculture's role in sustaining food production

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a large-scale disruption within South Africa's society. With the introduction of a 21-day lockdown, the agriculture sector remains responsible for food production, as well as the storage, processing, packaging, distribution and sale of food products. There is also the responsibility to take necessary precautionary measures relating to the provision of food to prevent further spreading the virus.



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Organised agriculture – which includes Agri SA, Agbiz, Grain SA and TLU SA – currently serves on the Department of Agriculture's Covid-19 task team.

In countries such as China, Italy, the USA, and others, large numbers of people have been infected, with the death toll in those countries has increased dramatically. In South Africa, the number of cases increases daily. "This is a cause for serious concern. As a country, however, we cannot ignore the implications of this virus and we must comply strictly with the lockdown measures," Omri van Zyl, Agri SA's executive director.

Essential goods and services

Essential goods such as all food, cleaning and hygiene products, medical and hospital supplies, fuel and necessities such as airtime, water and electricity, are excluded. This also includes a comprehensive range of services that are essential to ensure that all the necessary products are made available to the market.

With regards to agriculture, it includes services and products on the input side of food production and the production of food as such, as well as the storage, processing, packaging, distribution and sale of food products. However, agriculture has an enormous responsibility to ensure that the necessary precautionary measures are in place for all processes relating to the provision of food to prevent further spreading of the virus.

Agri SA – through daily interaction with the Department and Ministry of Agriculture – has discussed all the existing and potential problems that the sector experiences concerning food production. The Minister has referred these problems to the National COVID-19 Operational and Intelligence Task Team (NATJOINTS).

After inputs, the regulations in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 were amended to include food production as an essential service, was adjusted. The harvesting and storage of all farm products (wine, tobacco, wool, mohair, etc.) are now included in the definition of food as an essential product.

"The agricultural sector has a responsibility to apply all precautionary measures necessary to prevent the further spread of this deadly virus and to make sure that all workers wear masks and gloves. The sector needs to strictly comply with social-distancing rules in the work and transport environments; monitor workers and act promptly when someone shows any symptoms of having contracted the virus.

"Essentially the request for self-regulation of the disaster implies that organised agriculture provides assurance to the South African population that we will continue providing food for our nation in a responsible manner," adds van Zyl.

Agri SA has put the following in place:

- Distributing a movement template with Agri SA's logo to members for can use with their own logos to comply with the movement permit requirements. In the Northern Cape, for example, the provincial police structures have formally endorsed our logos and the assurance that comes with it.
- The setup of a command centre that will focus on daily updates, scenario planning, commodity issues, provincial issues and corporate issues experienced in the implementation of the lockdown. Issues that are monitored and discussed include port infrastructure updates, safety, labour, transport protocols, import and export protocols, to name a few.
- Communication to members is essential as many rules in the regulations are applied differently in different provinces. These are managed through members as the range of issues differs substantially.

There has been much confusion regarding the registration of entities with the DTI, says Agri SA – the position currently is that companies can register on the database, but it is not covered in the regulations and not compulsory.

Unfortunately, all sectors will be severely affected, while the agricultural industry remains in a privileged position. "We have a major responsibility, however, to manage this privilege smartly and with great circumspection", concludes van Zyl.