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CONFERENCE REVIEW: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN AGRICULTURE : NEEDS, SOURCES AND TECHNOLOGY

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This year's Agricultural Outlook Conference with its all important theme started by the opening address of the erstwhile National Minister of Agriculture Senator Dr A.I. van Niekerk. The title of his presentation was: *An update on the direction and restructuring process of agriculture*. He reminded farmers that in the end it is economic rules that dictates events not political ones. According to him, farmers had no alternative but to adapt to new circumstances posed by the government of national unity and the country's re-entry into world markets. Although Van Niekerk acknowledge that the most profound changes in the industry were the steps being taken to bring developing farmers into the mainstream of agriculture, he assured them that economic good sense would prevail. Any efforts merely to employ land for the satisfaction of ideological obsessions should be discouraged. Dr Van Niekerk advised farmers to put their efforts into overcoming the economic difficulties facing them with market deregulation and international trade, the futures market and electronic auctions. Renegotiation the Southern African Customs Union, illegal and subsidised imports, and provinces still operating old tariff systems were among the challenges facing the industry. He had stressed that after 10 hard years, the agricultural industry had successfully moved towards operating in the free market and now had a positive outlook.

Mr Andrew W. Shepherd (FAO) gave a presentation entitled: *Market Information in Agriculture*. He explained the value of market information services, experiences with data collection processing, transformation, dissemination and utilisation. Thereafter he gave some interesting examples on market information services in Indonesia and Zambia. The most valuable part of his presentation was his ideas for market information provision in South Africa. According to him there would be three recent developments that will have an impact on the type of information needed and the way in which it should be provided. Firstly, there is an urgent need to incorporate the black farmer into the market. This is, indeed, being addressed through the Broadening Access to Agriculture Thrust (BATAT) of the Ministry of Agriculture, yet expanding the definition of "farmer" to include other than large-scale farmers will also necessitate expanding the definition of market information. For example, where horticultural crops are concerned, there may be scooped for existing information providers to take on this task as agents of the government. This could be an alternative to the Government developing a parallel service.

Secondly, South Africa is emphasising decentralised development through the provinces. A precondition for providing market information to small-scale farmers is that there must be markets where price formation can take place. Thus attention also needs to be paid to infrastructure provision. Marketing should also be seen as an important part of the role of the extension service.

Finally, in connection with the liberalisation of grain marketing there will certainly be a need for information concerning prices and supply.

Dr Johan Willemsse (Agrimark Trends) has given a paper entitled, *Information in South African agriculture: Frustration and opportunities*. He has emphasised the need for market information for the proper functioning of markets, for business planning and for government policy. According to him the current situation with regard to agricultural statistics in South Africa is quite unsatisfactory and not up to standard. For example, in the case of industry information, where Boards were responsible, deregulation has weakened the Boards position, and others repaid most of their information as privileged. Thus, urgent attention needs to be given on the whole issue of information and statistics in agriculture, to act and classify responsibilities.

Simon Fiske's (Agri-Africa) presentation was entitled: *The effect of deregulation on the demand for and supply of agricultural information*. He believes that in the long run the agri-businessman's need for information will increasingly be satisfied by small circulation, tightly focused newsletters (which could well be delivered electronically), by commissioned research and media scanning (tailored to the specific needs of select user-groups with like interests) and by private consultancy.

Professor Philip Spies (Director : Institute for Futures Research, University of Stellenbosch) presented an overview on future perspectives on agricultural policy formulation. Agrifutura is a joint project of the Department of Agriculture, Western Cape, the Department of Agricultural Economics of the University of Stellenbosch and the Institute for Futures Research of the same university. It is a research and information service for strategic management and policy analysis in the agricultural sector. The fundamental changes currently taking place creates new opportunities for creative actions with respect to strategic positioning of agricultural organisations and a need for long-term analysis which can be provided by futures research. Results are intended to support policy formulation and strategic management for agricultural organisations, producers, suppliers, food processors and all those involved in rural and agricultural development in Southern Africa.

Mr Rod Gravelet-Blondin (SAFEX) presented a paper on *The role of future markets in a new market environment*. According to him, futures market transactions will play an increasing role in agricultural trade especially after the provisions of the Uruguay Round of GATT agreements are implemented.

Mr Attie Swart's (World Trade Organisation) paper

presented a paper entitled: *The impact of future trade relations with the European Union (EU) on South African agriculture*. He explained that South Africa has received an open invitation from the EU to explore the option to start a process leading to progressive and reciprocal trade liberalisation with a view to establish a free trade area. South Africa's response so far was the ongoing economic restructuring and the restructuring of regional relations including the intended renegotiation of the South African Customs Union agreement. South Africa's preparations are pragmatic in approach and based on a careful assessment of costs and benefits.

Mr E. Janovsky (Agrimark Trends) in his presentation: *Effect of deregulation on the needs and provision of information in the Southern African meat market* pinpointed the present state of affairs and the urgent

need to improved at a on price formation (local and international), production trends and trade statistics. In her closing remarks, Ms Thoko Didiza (Deputy Minister of Agriculture) emphasised the importance of dialogue between the various stakeholders in agriculture. She has stated that the aim of the Government of National Unity is to create a people centred society. What is then the role of the Government in connection with agricultural information? We have entered the hard world of trade and economics and we have to compete against strong competition. For this reason also, information (timely and correct) is needed to take appropriate decisions