

Little Karoo Drought: Replanting of orchards brings hope

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At night, while others are sleeping, Little Karoo fruit farmers lie awake. They toss and turn about the future.

For which orchards should the taps be closed? Which blocks need saving? Which trees must be cut down? If they re-plant, which cultivars? Grinding questions remain and sound answers are elusive.

On farms in this region, the same story is told everywhere..."My father is 82 and has farmed here his whole life. Never before has he experienced such a drought as the one we have now." Or, "This drought has been unprecedented. I have been farming since 1980 and have dealt with some rough situations. But have never experienced anything like this."

Large parts of the country were blessed with good rains in 2020 that broke the drought in most places. But in the Little Karoo between Montagu and Oudtshoorn the earth remains dry.

Dawie van Deventer, who farms with peaches between Montagu and Barrydale, is chairman of the Poortjieskloof Dam which has to supply irrigation water to approximately sixteen producers with 270 hectares of crops. In 2018, they were only able to get 60% water for irrigation. The dam last had water in May 2019 and is currently a dust bowl. "Quite strange to be chairman of an empty dam," he says ironically.

Van Deventer's land lies in two parts of the drought-stricken area. The one section falls within the Breede River Irrigation Scheme and he gets just enough water to keep the orchards going. The other is on Poortjieskloof side, without any water. Van Deventer says he last had a decent harvest in 2016. Meanwhile, producers rely on borehole water that is unfortunately quite brackish. "Brackish water is bad for the soil and the tree."

He is one of the fruit producers who now has hope. The hope came in the form of new orchard plantings made possible by a drought relief package from Hortgro and the Western Cape Department of Agriculture. A total of R1.1 million has been allocated to help fruit farmers re-plant orchards and serve as an economic injection for the drought-stricken region.

"I don't have words to explain what this lifeline means to me," Van Deventer said during a recent visit to his farm. "It gives me courage to carry on. To rethink how to farm in the region. Plant more suitable cultivars for these conditions."

Van Deventer is of the opinion that the key to the future of agriculture in the region, is water. "Money can't fix this, only water can. We simply need to find solutions to ensure and responsibly manage water for the region."

Pieter van der Merwe of Spera, outside Ladismith, says the financial assistance to replant trees will make a dramatic difference to their situation. "We lost about 30% of our orchards due to water shortages. We are but one farm in a much larger region. The humanitarian and financial impact is enormous. For landowners, workers, and related businesses."

Niël Joubert from Warmwater, between Montagu and Barrydale, says without drought assistance he would not have been able to go on. "Were it not for the input from industry organisations and other agricultural groups, as well as the public, things would have been drastically different." And every bit helps, he says. "Whether it's a food parcel or something else, if you save on one thing then you can at least pay Eskom or buy another bag of fertilizer." Speaking about the replanting aid package, he says: "It makes a huge difference. We are incredibly grateful. It helps us to get back on our feet."

Joubert says it is the sixth season in five years that he there is not enough water for his fruit trees. Normally, they get about 400 to 450 mm rainfall per year. "Last year we had less than 250 mm. The effect on trees is self-explanatory. To survive, we had to chop down trees." Joubert lost 44% of his orchards.

"One can ask, did I farm too much?" he says, "but all the elders of the region will tell you that they have never experienced a drought like this one."

Joubert harvested Bulida apricots in December. "After the harvest, we watered the orchard one more time and then closed the tap. I wanted so save water for my Ruby Star and September Yummy orchards." By late December, the water situation was so precarious that he also had to close the tap for the September Yummy orchard.

With the replant funding, Joubert plans to plant apricots. "Apricots do well in the Little Karoo, and they are harvested early in the season, which means that you can make your water less much faster." He is also exploring the possibility of planting early plums that ripen in the first week of December, for the same reason as apricots. "After harvest you want to give fertilization and ensure that you collect enough water until April. So that trees enter winter in good condition."

Jaer Jaffa from Yeyethu Empowerment Project in the Little Karoo, says they have 6.7 hectares of fruit trees, but since 2016 no water to keep them going. "The drought shot us through the knees. It's a sad day when you harvest two crates of peaches from three hectares." Jaffa and the other sixteen beneficiaries are extremely grateful for the re-planting fund with which they plan to plant Sandvliet peaches. "A peach tree is hardy. It's not something that dies easily. Sandvliet is also a peach that ripens early in the season. We can now look to the future and hope for rain."

In 2019, the Farmers' Association of the Ladismith region calculated that R30 million in wages had been lost due to drought. A total of 1000 families were affected by the labour crisis and 300 hectares of fruit trees had already been cut down. Money that was usually ploughed back into rural economies dried up and several businesses in the town did not survive.

In the midst of the agriculture and humanitarian crisis, Hortgro handed out more than a 1000 food parcels to agricultural workers and producers affected by the drought in the Klein Karoo in December 2019. This was followed by a wage assistance scheme to agricultural workers to financially assist producers in order to get through the production season. Funds have also been made available for the control of crop protection in the region. Hortgro also held a 'resilience workshop' for producers and farm workers in Ladismith to empower them with coping strategies.

Since then, the situation is constantly being monitored, says Mariette Kotze, Hortgro's Group Operations Manager. Stone fruit producers in the Little Karoo from Montagu, Barrydale, Ladismith, Calitzdorp to Prince Albert were severely affected by the drought. Some lost their farms and hundreds of farm workers their jobs.

"The replanting of orchards is already underway, and to date ten hectares have been re-established. We hope to plant 32 hectares of deciduous fruit orchards during 2021."

She believes it is important to look at the actual value of the product. "There is a ripple effect for every apricot picked. For every one person working in agriculture, there are four dependents. When the work falls away, it has a huge socio-economic impact on a region."

According to Kotze, the state's disaster aid fund does not cover long-term crops. "For fruit farmers, it is a survival struggle. At least the orchard re-establishment fund offers some hope and helps growers to face the future."

Kotze says producers had to apply and motivate why they qualified for orchard replanting assistance. "We looked closely at long-term planning, cultivar selection and what the greater economic impact would be. This drought is far from over and it will still take a lot of input or a lot of rain before this region will recover."