

Youth told to embrace farming

Agriculture offers boundless opportunity for the brave and innovative, Zokwana tells youth

By: Staff Reporter

South Africa needs to increase fish production by 50 million tonnes by 2030 in order to meet the global demand of fish products, agriculture, forestry and fisheries minister, Senzeni Zokwana said.

Zokwana said South Africa has a potential to increase current production from 5 000 tons to 20 000 tons which would in turn increase the sector's contribution to GDP (Gross Domestic Product) from R500 million to R3 billion. Further to that, at least 15 000 job opportunities could be created.

The minister said this during a youth symposium held in the Xhariep district this week to advise young people on the career and entrepreneurial opportunities available in the agricultural sector.

The three-day event which brought together youths from around the country was held at the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre at Gariiep Dam. It was also attended by Free State agriculture MEC Oupa Khoabane and Xhariep District Municipality executive mayor Mongi Mntwanambi.

Zokwana said the United Nations food security arm, the Food and Agriculture Organisation has encouraged South Africa to boost its fisheries production and it was now up to the youths to play a more active role in the development of this industry and ensure that the country's economy prospers.

"This aspiration cannot be met if we continue with a business as usual approach," said the minister.

"We need to change. We need a business unusual approach and young people who are the future of this country should bring forth fresh and innovative ideas. That will force us to get into the business unusual mode.

"We need young farmers and fishermen to take this space. This sector needs young people who can focus on livestock rearing, poultry

production and fisheries production (also known as aquaculture," said Zokwana.

The centre is a multipurpose facility that focuses on research, training and demonstrating how to breed fish for commercial purposes. It demonstrates the aquaculture systems and boasts a hatchery for various freshwater fish species.

Built through a partnership with the Chinese government, the fishery is one of the 14 demonstration centres found in Africa.

He added that next year the government would place about 180 young unemployed agriculture, forestry and fisheries graduates on farms across the country's nine provinces for a period of two years.

Zokwana said his department will also recruit the young unemployed graduates on a contract basis through the National Agricultural Marketing Council to allow them to gain experience and assist in finding solutions to challenges faced by the sector.

Khoabane explained that the centre focuses more on aquaculture which is a scarce skill as it was not accessible to blacks during the apartheid period.

"It is an area of priority for our government as it has potential for growth and to contribute more meaningfully to economic growth, job creation, and food security for our country," said the MEC.

"The fact that aquaculture is at its infancy here, makes it crucial for us to expose our young people to the great opportunities available so that they can also enter this space," he added.

Khoabane indicated that aquaculture is one of the sectors that could contribute towards the conservation of fisheries resources which are currently plateauing and in some instances declining at an alarming rate.

The department is responding to the National Development Plan (NDP): Vision 2030 which highlights the role the youth can play in the country's advancement.

The MEC said: "Through the effective



A look around ... Forestry and fisheries minister, Senzeni Zokwana (right) and Free State agriculture MEC Oupa Khoabane (second from right) being shown around the Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centre at Gariiep Dam

implementation of aquaculture we can ensure access to fish products and thus supplement the shortfall on the demand for fish products. We need young people to own fish farms as well as fishing companies.

"It is up to the youth of today to focus on critical issues like the youth of 1976 hence I appeal to our youth to look at this sector and seize the opportunities that are presented to them. Statistics show that South Africa has a shortage of fish vets, young fish farmers and fishermen.

"As government we can only create a good and productive environment for the youth but it

is up to them to take up the opportunities in the sector."

The Free State provincial government has sent youths to countries like Belarus, China and Russia to study in agricultural related fields which include veterinary science, aquaculture and crop production.

Ntsokolo Skwenya, a youth from Potchefstroom in the Western Cape was excited that the three day event had helped them access information they would normally struggle to get.

"I did not have any information about aquaculture but now I have decided to follow this

field because it is something new to us as young people. I would like thank our government for creating platforms such as this one to help us develop ourselves and be to contribute to the economy of our country," said Skwenya.

Ndobe Akela from Limpopo thanked the government for the event saying it had allowed her to learn about different kinds of fish.

"We really need to acknowledge government's efforts to ensure that our lives improve. People cannot survive without agriculture so we really have deviate from the old or traditional ways of thinking and focus on agro processing and aquaculture," she said.