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PGP
PHAHAMA GRAIN PHAKAMA

Soil cultivation is key to a good yield

IN ORDER TO HARVEST A GOOD YIELD, SOIL CULTIVATION IS NEEDED. SOIL MUST BE CULTIVATED TO CREATE A MEDIUM WHERE MOISTURE CAN BE STORED, WEEDS, PESTS AND DISEASES CAN BE COMBATTED, CROP RESIDUES AND CHEMICALS CAN BE INCORPORATED, AND A FAVOURABLE SEEDBED CAN BE CREATED FOR SEEDLING EMERGENCE AND GROWTH.

Soil is sometimes cultivated to control wind and water erosion and to help water penetrate the soil. In the most cases stubble om top of the soil is your friend, as it can help a producer to lower his production cost.

Sustainable future crop production is non-negotiable. Soil quality deterioration should be prevented, and everything possible must be done to rather improve it. The soil quality (soil health) is the combination of the chemical, physical and biological ability of soil to sustain its crop productivity at a high level. At the same time, erosion must be prevented. These objectives can only be totally achieved through conservation agriculture.

CULTIVATION METHODS

As most farmers are not 100% conservation farmers due to their farming systems, soil cultivation is still needed. To achieve one or more of the cultivation objectives mentioned, mouldboard and disc ploughs are used in conventional cultivation systems.

The soil and crop residues are mixed in the plough layer through the ploughing action. The soil surface is usually left with little, if any, residue. Secondary shallower tillage actions are often needed later in the season, with tine or disc implements to achieve one or more of the mentioned objectives.

Disadvantages of conventional cultivation systems

Due to the disturbance of the soil, its quality deteriorates, as reflected by the decline in the organic carbon content. The soil structure is also destroyed or deteriorates, the erosion susceptibility increases. In many instances, water run-off and the consequential erosion are enhanced by soil cultivation, especially in a conventional system.

In many soil texture classes, conventional ploughing usually results in compaction or the creation of a plough pan in the subsoil,

The maize is dying on the top, but there is moisture under the compaction layer. Only a deep rip action will break the plough pan effectively.

which limits root growth. A plough pan is a compacted layer below the ploughing depth. The plough pan in the subsoil will limit root growth and has a negative effect on the yield. The ploughing depth should therefore be varied between years, but eventually the pan will be formed. In drought years the crop can be dying, with moisture under the compaction layer (**Photo 1**).

Sandier and wetter soils usually compact faster under plough and disc cultivation actions than drier and more clayey soils. In such cases, deeper and more costly tillage methods are usually required, which results in further deterioration of the soil quality.

Clay soils that shrink and swell under drying and wetting spells usually can alleviate compaction naturally. The deterioration of soils, resulting erosion and ever-increasing energy and mechanisation costs have resulted in an awareness that alternative cultivation practices are required.

Ploughed systems are less suitable in dry conditions in particular, as the soil loses relatively large amounts of moisture during the ploughing, which can result in a poor yield if there is no follow-up rainfall.

At least 30% of the stubble must stay on top of the soil for as long as possible. This will prevent the forming of a soil crust, enhance water infiltration and help to keep weeds under control. Too much stubble can cause a straw layer at the furrow base.

In this photo the effect of a tine implement can be seen. The shanks and shares did not break the soil properly and this implement needs urgent changes to do a proper job.

Heavy rainfall after sowing can also cause problems, as the residue-free surface can form a strong crust on certain types of soil. In addition, heavy rainfall and wind can lead to a high risk of erosion in some regions.

Ploughing is not always negative. It is the best and most effective way to kill weed if it is done correctly. If you think you need to plough, do it, but look for better alternatives.

Conservation tillage

The objective with conservation tillage is to leave at least 30% of the soil surface covered with crop residues after cultivation, whereby erosion is restricted and the initially high-water infiltration rate is prolonged. Chisel plough cultivation usually succeeds in these objec-

tives, provided that the initial amount of crop residue was sufficient. The well-known rip-on-row cultivation that is practised, can also be considered as conservation tillage as most of the residue is left on the soil surface.

However, chisel plough, rip and other comparable tillage actions disturb the soil enough to undermine its quality. A high soil moisture loss is also calculated in these actions, although not as high as in the plough system. With rollers attached to the chisel plough, the moisture loss is reduced.

Chisel ploughs work well if they are maintained properly. The trip springs must keep the shank in the soil at the right angle to be able to penetrate the soil. Make sure that the shares used are the right shares for the chisel plough and not worn away. Replace the shares in time to protect the shank and to work deep enough.

Soil profile pits

The use of soil profile pits provides a lot of information for producers. The necessary working depth can then be established. Working too shallow will cost the producer a lot of money, but working too deep will also cost unnecessary money. Make use of soil profile pits to evaluate the performance of the implement.

> At least 30% of the stubble must stay on top of the soil for as long as possible.

EROSION

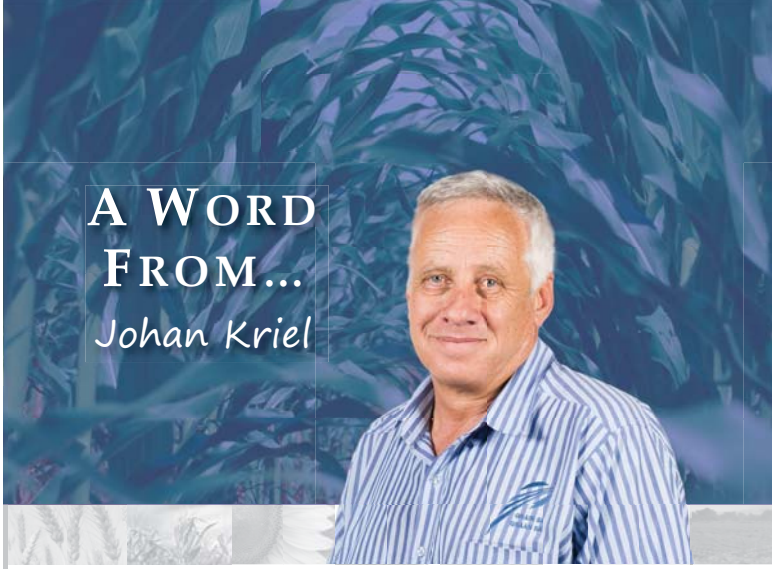
Water and wind erosion is a problem in nearly all the production areas. The best way to manage water erosion, is to contour the fields. If the fields are contoured, farmers must maintain the waterways and contours correctly. If the fields are not contoured, it is important to work it by following the topography of the area.

This means that the working direction must always follow the contour of the field. This way of working will not stop erosion but will help a lot as each crop row will act as a waterway to take the water out of the field. Never work a field downhill, because this is the beginning of erosion and lower water infiltration.

The more the soil is worked and the more the stubble is removed, the higher the chances of rain forming a strong crust on certain types of soil. If this crust is not managed, water will run away instead of infiltrating the soil.

In the case where there is no stubble covering the soil or where a crust is formed, it makes sense to cultivate (*skoffel*) the crops shallow after planting. The cultivator will not only break the crust, but will conserve the moisture in the soil and will control weeds. This action must be done as soon as possible after rain and must be repeated after each downpour. ■

PIETMAN BOTHA, INDEPENDENT AGRICULTURAL CONSULTANT



WHILE WRITING THIS ARTICLE IN JUNE, IT WAS CLEAR FROM DAILY REPORTS RECEIVED BY THE PGP TEAM THAT YIELDS FROM THE HARVESTING OF SOYBEANS, SUNFLOWERS AND MAIZE ARE EVEN LOWER THAN THE CROP ESTIMATES PROMISED BECAUSE MANY FARMERS SUFFERED LOSSES AS A RESULT OF THE DROUGHT AND EXTREME HEAT EARLIER IN THE SEASON.

Here are a few points to consider before you get ready to plant for the next season. If you are not in a favourable position, reassess whether you are going to put a cash crop in the ground again.

- Have you taken soil samples from the fields you plan to plant? Have you discussed the results with your mentor and a reliable fertiliser input supplier? Do you know what the pH, phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) status of the soil is, and what it should be? Never plant on land where the nutrient status of the soil is not correct.
- Have you done the soil depth and soil classification of your land? As a result of changing weather conditions, the risk of planting on marginal lands is too big.
- How is the land preparation progressing on your farm? If you are just starting with primary tillage, you are already behind schedule. Lands must now be ready to absorb all the possible moisture.
- Do you know the optimal planting window for each crop in your area?
- Has financing been arranged? Are there funds available?
- Has your input been delivered? Are you sure you are using the right products?
- Are your tractors and especially your planter serviced and ready to work? Have you arranged for a contractor in time if you do not have enough tractors and implements available for your planned hectares?

I have great respect for our grain farmers. You do an incredible job in challenging circumstances. I pray God's strength and grace over you.

– Johan Kriel is the regional development manager for the Western Free State region. ■

Meet the Farmer of the Year finalists

THE MAIN GOAL OF THE PHAHAMA GRAIN PHAKAMA (PGP) FARMER OF THE YEAR COMPETITION IS NOT ABOUT WINNING, BUT ABOUT CELEBRATING THE LEARNING, GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND HARD WORK OF THE THOUSANDS OF FARMERS WHO ARE PART OF THE FARMER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME. AFTER THE PANEL LOOKED AT THE FARMING ENTERPRISES OF THE VARIOUS NOMINEES, THEY SELECTED THIS YEAR'S FINALISTS. HERE ARE THE TOP ACHIEVERS FOR 2024.

SUBSISTENCE FARMERS
(0,5 ha to 3 ha)

It is the second year that **Gcinile Beauty Gumbi (53)** is a finalist in this category. This diligent farmer from Uphizane farm in the Paul Pietersburg district, has always loved working the soil. While raising her children she started planting vegetables to provide for her family.

She currently plants different types of vegetables, maize and dry beans. Since joining Grain SA in 2013, she has attended five training courses and 69 study group sessions. She is working hard to realise her dream of getting more arable land to plant more hectares of maize and vegetables.

Although **Mhlangenqaba Mkizwana (77)** from Maclear in the Eastern Cape is the oldest finalist in the 2024 competition, he still dreams of becoming a commercial farmer. His devotion to agriculture comes from his parents, who were communal farmers. After school he left home to look for employment and started working for various mine companies in Gauteng.

In 1989 he returned home to follow his dream of becoming a full-time farmer, and he has never looked back. His agricultural knowledge has increased since becoming part of the Farmer Development Programme. He is the chairperson of the Gamakhulu Study Group.

Mfaniseni Paulus Khumalo (66) remembers working in the fields with his parents and siblings. After a company he worked for was liquidated, he decided to start farming. Before he joined the Farmer Development Programme, he used to get ten to twelve bags of maize.

Discovering Grain SA in 2019 was a game changer, as he managed to increase his yield to more than 4 t/ha. The next two years he realised 6 t/ha and last season he reached 7 t/ha. He is a member of the Lijahasisu Study Group and enjoys mentoring up-and-coming farmers in the area.

SMALLHOLDER FARMERS
(4 ha to 49 ha)

Mandla Enos Nkosi (52) developed a passion for farming at a young age, while working on the farm where he grew up. When the farm was sold, he worked hard to make money to realise his dream of being a farmer.

A transport contract he secured in 2014 helped him become financially stronger so that he could plant more than the 6 ha he first planted. Mandla joined the Farmer Development Programme in 2021. Study group attendance, mentorship and a training course have helped him to develop as a farmer, although his early years on the farm shaped him into the farmer he is today.

Jim Besabakhe Masemola (58) developed an interest in agriculture at a young age. He did not complete his school education due to challenging circumstances and started working on a farm in 1980. Years later he started working for himself and tried his hand at farming.

He used to get between five and six bags of maize per hectare, but after becoming part of the Farmer Development Programme in 2019, he started to farm seriously, following the correct production practices. In the 2019/2020 season, he harvested 4 t/ha of maize. Last season it increased to 6 t/ha and he is hoping for at least 7 t/ha this season.

Buyisiwe Steven Dlamini (55) was a farm worker for five years before leaving the countryside for city life in Johannesburg. While working as a delivery driver, he was saving up to buy his own truck so that he could start his own delivery business. This dream was realised and he still does transport as a side-line business.

He joined the Farmer Development Programme in 2018 and has been gaining knowledge through attending study group sessions and training courses. He gave his scrapyard business to his son in 2021 to focus on his dream of being a farmer. He now farms on communal land in the Volksrust area.

POTENTIAL COMMERCIAL FARMERS

(50 ha to 249 tons)

Although **Dieketseng Gladys Mahlelehlele (38)** has a BA Communication degree, she has always dreamed of becoming a farmer. She learned valuable agricultural skills working with her father, a big cattle farmer, over weekends and during school holidays. Dieketseng attended her first study group meeting in 2015.

She applied to lease the farm Vrede in the Brandfort area in 2019. It is the same farm her father leased years ago. Currently she is planting sunflower on medium-potential cash crop soil, but wants to lease high-potential land to grow the crop side of her business. She also wants to become a leading female farmer to inspire young girls to farm.

Zoliwe Nombewu (46) became interested in agriculture while helping her parents plant during the December school holidays. She started her farming dream by growing vegetables and sold the surplus to the community. When she joined the farmers' organisation in her area, she discovered that there is business potential in grain production.

She now plants yellow and white maize, soybeans and cabbage on communal land in the Tsolo region in the Eastern Cape. She is the chairperson of the Sophumelela Study Group. This is the second consecutive year that Zoliwe has been chosen as a finalist in this category of the competition.

When **Alfred Gondo (33)** started working as a merchandiser, his interest in agriculture was ignited. He began planting in the 2015/2016 season, motivated by his late father's passion for farming. He gained a wealth of knowledge and agricultural skills after joining the Farmer Development Programme.

In his first year as a farmer, Alfred planted only 20 ha, but this season he planted more than 100 ha – 62 ha soybeans and 42 ha white maize – at Koornfontein in the Middelburg region. He dreams of increasing his hectares to 500 ha in three years' time and buying more farming equipment to be more efficient and productive.

NEW ERA COMMERCIAL FARMERS

(more than 250 tons)

Luvuyo Mbuto (61) only started farming in 2016 and now has a mixed farming operation at Altona Farm, in the Swartberg area in KwaZulu-Natal, where maize is produced. He has been a member of the Farmer Development Programme since 2020 and is also a member of the Ongeluksnek Study Group.

This is the second consecutive year that Luvuyo has been a finalist in this category. He says his "blood is green", as he dreams only of crops and feed. His season does not start with planting, but when he harvests and sells his maize, because then his next business plan is compiled.

Petrus Ranko Tsotetsi (58) started farming in 2010 after the death of his father, Joseph, in 2009. He left city life and a secure income behind to honour his late father's legacy and started farming full-time at Die Bult, near Kestell in the Free State. He successfully completed agricultural courses in 2013 and 2014 to gain more knowledge about farming.

Petrus produces maize, soybeans and sugar beans in a rotation system. He became a Grain SA member in 2013 and enrolled in the Farmer Development Programme in 2016. He was a nominee for this category in 2023 and is excited to be a finalist this year.

Bheki Isaac Mabuza (51) produces maize on his farm, Donkerhoek, in the Amersfoort region in Mpumalanga. He joined Grain SA in 2016, and has attended a training course and 65 study group sessions, where his farming skills have been developed. He was elected as the 2022 Grain SA Potential Commercial Farmer of the Year. He has since grown his farming enterprise and now falls under the New Era category.

One of his biggest achievements was finishing in the third place (amongst the commercial producers) in the category for maize production in the Eastern Highveld region in the 2021 Grain SA Grow for Gold National Yield Competition. ■

EDITORIAL TEAM

DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE BUYING SEEDS

AMONG ALL THE EXPENSES INCURRED BY A FARMER, THE COST OF SEEDS OFTEN GOES UNNOTICED ON THE PRODUCTION BUDGET. DEPENDING ON THE PLANT POPULATION, THE COST OF SEEDS CAN RANGE FROM 10% TO 17% OF THE TOTAL INPUT COST AND, IN CERTAIN INSTANCES, CAN EVEN SURPASS THE COST OF FUEL.

This article delves into the anticipated seed costs for the 2024/2025 season, along with offering some advice on purchasing seeds and seed treatments.

SEED PRICE

During the 2024/2025 production season, combined maize prices surged by an average of 6,1%, leading to an increase that is almost half of the 13,9% rise observed in the 2023/2024 season.

Breaking it down, the average price of **white maize** escalated by 6,84%, while **yellow maize** had a 7,45% increase. Additionally, it's notable that the price of white maize is approximately 0,54% higher than the price of yellow maize.

> When making purchases, ensure that the seed's quality meets all the requirements.

Sunflower prices experienced a modest 3,7% increase, in stark contrast to the 15,7% surge witnessed in the previous season. **Soybeans**, on the other hand, encountered an average price decrease of 3,8%, compared to the 15,2% hike recorded last season. **Sorghum** prices saw a 7,6% increase for the 2024/2025 season, down from the 16,6% increase in the 2023/2024 season.

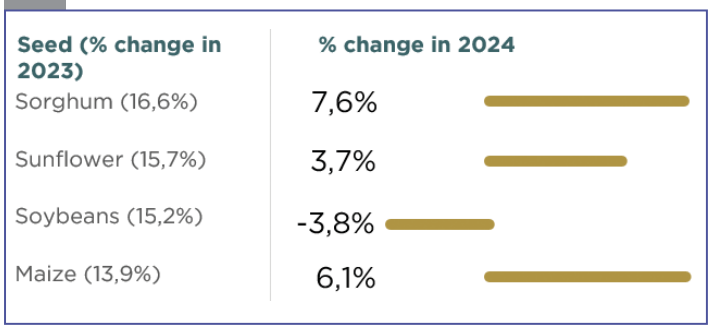
The information mentioned above can also be seen visually in **Figure 1**.

In terms of inflation rates, for January 2024, which stood at 5,3%, sunflower prices experienced a rise lower than the inflation rate, while maize prices were 0,8% higher and sorghum prices 2,3% higher.

GUIDELINES WHEN BUYING SEED

- Keep in mind that prices may vary depending on the size of the seed bag. Maize seeds are available in 18 kg, 20 kg and 25 kg bags, as well as bags containing 60 000 or 80 000 seeds each. Sunflower seeds come packaged in bags containing 150 000 or 180 000 seeds, while soybean seeds are offered in bags containing 60 000 or 140 000 seeds, or in 25 kg bags.
- Certain seed batches are treated with chemicals, which can influence the prices.
- Various companies offer rebate structures for volume purchases, order confirmation, early delivery and early payment.

1 ***Price increases.***



Source: Grain SA

- Prior to purchasing, carefully consider the agronomic characteristics, adaptability, yield performance and stability, quality attributes, as well as disease and pest resistance of a specific cultivar.
- When making purchases, ensure that the seed's quality meets all the requirements, including these indicated on the label, particularly regarding the uniformity of the kernel size and shape.
- Please consult with your seed company specialist to identify the best cultivar suited to your needs and farm.

Treatment of seeds

Seed companies cannot guarantee the quality of seeds, unless the seed treatment is performed by the seed company itself or by a registered chemical supplier utilising ISO-accredited equipment and processes.

If the treatment is conducted by a chemical supplier, he must ensure that the treatment does not compromise seed germination. Additionally, the chemical used must be registered under *Act 36 of 1947* and preferably endorsed by the seed company for the specific cultivar. Treatment of Rhizobium is exempted. Growers are advised to consult with seed companies regarding the most effective Rhizobium for their cultivars.

It is recommended that growers who opt not to purchase pretreated seeds and wish to treat them later, collaborate with either the seed company or an ISO-accredited chemical supplier.

CONCLUSION

Seed constitutes not only 10% to 17% of your input costs, varying based on the cultivar and plant population, but also significantly influences the appearance and yield of the crop. Hence, it is imperative to conduct thorough research and seek advice from knowledgeable individuals when selecting and purchasing seeds. This ensures that you choose the optimal cultivar, tailored not only to your specific requirements but also suitable for your farm and environmental conditions. ■

JOHAN TEESSEN, AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIST INTERN, GRAIN SA

Part 2

Invest time in a BUSINESS PLAN

A BUSINESS PLAN IS ESSENTIAL FOR SECURING FUNDING OR AN INVESTMENT. IT SHOULD BE CLEAR AND UNDERSTANDABLE FOR PEOPLE WHO MAY NOT KNOW MUCH ABOUT FARMING.

Writing a business plan for your farm involves several steps to ensure it meets the requirements of those who will review it, such as financial institutions or investors.

Those stakeholders often have specific needs and may focus on different aspects of your farm, so it's crucial to ask them what they want before you start writing. This helps to avoid wasted effort on a plan that doesn't meet their criteria.

A 'bankable' business plan is credible, contains the correct technical and financial information, addresses key concerns of financiers and shows that the farm can be run successfully.

When formulating your business plan, consider its ultimate objective, who will use it and the period it covers. This helps to define its scope.

FRAMEWORK

Here is a simplified framework for a farm business plan:

1 **Cover page**: Includes the title, business name, contact details and date.
2 **Table of contents**: Lists sections, graphs, figures and annexures.
3. **Executive summary**: Highlights key points and the purpose of the plan.
4. **Business description**: Covers the purpose, background, history and current situation of the farm.
5. **Strategic plan**: Outlines the vision, mission, goals, market analysis and a SWOT analysis.
6. **Operational and production plan**: Details ownership, farm layout, production processes, equipment and schedules.
7. **Marketing plan**: Describes product, pricing, promotion, placement, processes, people, competitive advantages, contracts and market risks.
8. **Organisation and staffing plan**: Lists the management team, staffing needs, job descriptions and CVs of senior management.
9. **Financial plan**: Provides financial statements, projected financials and enterprise budgets.
10. **Risk planning**: Identifies risks, their impact and includes a sensitivity analysis.
11. **Implementation and monitoring**: Develops an action plan and timeline.
12. **References**: Lists sources used.
13. **Annexures**: Includes supporting documents such as IDs, registration papers, analyses, agreements and detailed financials.

Your business plan represents you to potential financiers, who often make funding decisions based solely on the information in the plan. Thus, investing time and effort in creating a thorough, professional plan is vital. If you can't do it yourself, hire someone to help.

The next article will cover how to present your business plan to potential financiers or stakeholders. ■

YOLANDI KRUGER, AGRICULTURAL ADVISOR AT DUNAMUS

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Study groups offer a learning opportunity

AT study group (SG) meetings, farmers have access to information and expert advice. The study groups bring the farmer development footprint to key grain-growing regions. This is how the FDP team gets to know the farmers and the farmers learn to trust the team. Between 9 May and 11 June the PGP team led 39 study group visits. Here are some of the highlights.

The Emmaus SG meeting focussed on the renewal of membership. Positive feedback was received in this regard.

Shelling methods were also discussed at the Newcastle-Doornkop SG, with one farmer demonstrating the ease and effectiveness of hand shelling.

It often helps to include a practical session during the SG meeting. At the Newcastle-Doornkop SG session, the group looked at signs that indicate whether a crop is ready for harvesting.

At the Isandlwana SG meeting, the Beyond Abundance project and costing progress were on the agenda.

LEARNERS (AND TEACHERS) learn more about agriculture

IT is essential for the youth to learn about the value of agriculture as a source of food and fibre, as well as about the various career opportunities in agriculture. Grain SA's Schools Programme recognises the potential of the youth to make a significant impact on the agricultural sector.

In the period from 9 May to 11 June, 34 schools were visited by **Phumza Mtukushe** who ensured that 15 schools in the Eastern Cape learned more about agriculture; **Marietjie Purchase** who visited seven schools in the Free State and **Khoza Ntokoza** who went to twelve schools in the Dundee region to share the insightful information with the learners.

The feedback received from the teachers and pupils was very positive.

- A teacher from Gecelo Primary School mentioned that the staff found it just as insightful as the pupils. She asked if Khoza could do a follow-up practical session, as they want to learn how to plant and grow vegetables with the prices of food skyrocketing.
- The pupils from one of the schools in the Free State said the presentation was an eye-opener to them because now they know how products are manufactured.
- According to a pupil from the Dundee region they learned a lot. 'We learnt a lot about farming – things such as the soil condition. We also learned that the Western Cape provides wine, which is made with grapes.'
- Zweledinga Primary School's teachers commented that the pupils now know that farming is very important, as they will save money when they produce their own food.
- This programme showed the pupils the real world and the importance of making informed decisions while they are young, said a staff member at Emzweni Primary School.

One of the colourful schools visited in the Free State was Diphakweng Primary School.