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technology for the farmer

No 101

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Novatek: Feeding for prosperity

p 3 Zambia

p 11 Namibia

Massey Ferguson sets the standard in Namibia

p 32 Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's dairy churns with increased milk production



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Delve into the dynamic world of sustainable farming practices

Dear Readers,
As the mid-year mark approaches, we reflect on the resilience, innovation, and determination that characterise Africa's agricultural sector.

This month, we delve into the dynamic world of sustainable farming practices. With climate change posing unprecedented challenges, it is more crucial than ever to adopt techniques that not only enhance productivity but also safeguard our environment for future generations.

Our featured articles spotlight how Massey Ferguson delivers comfort and efficiency to Namibian farmer, Georg Sievers, and we take a look at the best plants to grow with hydroponic systems.

More news from Namibia: The Namibian chicken industry is rejoicing following the government's decision to lift a one-year prohibition on importing chickens from neighbouring South Africa. Another interesting story in this month's edition is abnormalities in egg production and what you should be on the lookout for.

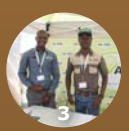
In line with our commitment to foster the sharing of knowledge, we also examine the role of technology in modernising agriculture in our monthly Technews column where we take a look at the latest innovations in agricultural technology from around the world.

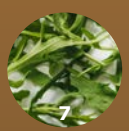
Our Technews article covers everything from pesticide free agriculture, a robotic dog that autonomously waters plants, to Kverneland's new self-propelled Etruck. These technological advancements are not just trends; they are the bedrock of a more efficient and prosperous agricultural future.

As always, we bring you expert insights and practical advice from seasoned professionals in the field. Whether you are a farmer, agribusiness owner, researcher, or enthusiast, our goal is to equip you with the knowledge and inspiration needed to thrive in this vital sector.

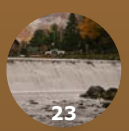
Thank you for your continued support and engagement. Together, let us cultivate a future where African agriculture flourishes, ensuring food security and prosperity for all.

Happy reading!
Bianca Henning
bianca@proagri.co.za













Content

3. Novatek: Feeding for prosperity
5. Spot the difference, check your eggs
7. Hydroponics 4: Time to start planting
11. Massey Ferguson delivers comfort and efficiency to Namibia
13. Namibia lifts ban on poultry imports from South Africa
17. Technews: The latest in agricultural technology from around the world
23. Zimbabwe's dam constructio a slow drip
27. GMOs return to haunt Zimbabwe
30. Greens shortage stalks Zimbabwe
32. Zimbabwe's dairy churns with increased milk production

Cover



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technology for the farmer

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Feeding for prosperity

by Benine Ackermann

Need food for your sheep, chickens, pigs, horses, or fish? Look no further, Novatek Animal Feed has it all.

Novatek supplies scientifically formulated quality feeds for your animals to grow to their full potential. In times of drought when natural grazing is scarce, one can rely on these quality feed products to last one through the toughest of times e.g., during periods of drought.

Novatek products are readily available in a number of outlets within Zambia and they endeavour to ensure a supply to the public.

Novatek had a stand at the AgriTech Expo where Lemmy Sikumba, A Technical Advisor at Novatek Animal Feeds (Southern Region) educated visitors on the company and brand: "We strive to produce a wide range of quality feed products to our customers. We put the customer first and support small and large clients."

Jere Khuzwana, A Technical Advisor (Northern Region) added that: "At Novatek we are staying ahead of time by introducing new products. Our Catfish Range is a new addition to the Novatek Range of products for example. We also produce feed for Crocodiles.

We wanted to bring something in with precise nutrition and targeted towards niche markets. We increased our pelleting capacity at the Mpongwe Plant and introduced a new Flour Plant as well."

Their product range includes the following:

- Broiler feeds
- Layer feeds
- Pullet feeds
- Pig feeds
- Aqua feeds
- Dog food
- Free range chicken feed
- Ruminant feeds
- Horse feeds
- Concentrates
- Macropacks

Novatek is strategically located with a large retail and distribution network to serve farmers all over Zambia. They are the first and only feed company in Zambia that has an ISO22000 certification. ISO22000 is an international Food Safety Management System (FSMS) Standard used by business entities to ensure that the food, in their case feed, is safe for their consumers. This ensures that the feed will not cause harm throughout the food chain.

They have more than 50 agents in the region and agents in every town. They have two production facilities located in the capital city Lusaka and one in the Central Province.

Novatek exports feed to eleven countries with great success and supplies a full range of technical services to its customers on nutrition, feeding programmes and animal husbandry. The technical support is given through farm visits, phone consultations or farmers days.

They also offer a range of raw feed material tests to farmers and the general public, and provide feed formulations upon request to farmers using the Novatek Concentrates and Macropacks.

The formulations are well balanced, and are based on raw materials that are responsibly sourced.



Lemmy Sikumba,A Technical Advisor at Novatek Animal Feeds (Southern Region) and Jere Khuzwana, A Technical Advisor (Northern Region) at the AgriTech Expo in Zambia.

For more information on Novatek's wide range of products and quality feed for your farm, contact the Novatek National Sales Manager on (+260) 97-125-2522

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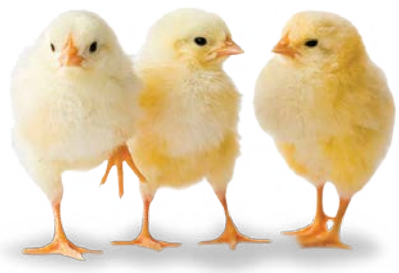

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Spot the difference, **check your eggs**

More than just feed

by Rowena Blanco, Animal Nutritionist, Tiger Animal Feeds

Have you ever bought a tray of eggs or cracked a few eggs and noticed something strange either outside or inside the egg? Commercial egg production, whether on a large scale or small scale, will often result in some odd-looking eggs. This article highlights ten of the most common abnormalities and the possible causes of them.

The egg laying process, from the release of the yolk from the ovary to the actual laying of the egg, takes approximately 24 to 26 hours to be complete. At the end of the process, a perfectly oval-shaped egg is expected but this is not always what the hen lays.

What are some of the peculiarities we have seen:

Pale egg yolks

Pale egg yolks are nothing to be concerned about, they are just not aesthetically appealing and gives one the impression that there is something wrong with the egg. The colour of the yolk is directly related to the pigment the hen consumes. Diets richer in carotenoids (such as yellow maize) will have darker egg yolks, whereas diets with white maize will have a paler egg yolk.

Vivid orange egg yolks

Occasionally, you will find yolks with a dark orange colour. This means that the diet which the hen consumed had too much artificial pigmentation (such as carophyll).

Double yolk eggs

This is common with large and jumbo-sized eggs and is not a problem for table egg production. It is caused when two yolks are released from the oviduct at the same time and encased in one shell.

Bloodstained eggs

Bloodstained eggs are usually common in younger flocks in early lay and is a result of straining on the part of the hen where large eggs are involved. This can be avoided by ensuring that the birds are fully grown and sexually mature before providing the required artificial light (16 hrs/day) for commencement of lay.



Bloodstained egg. (poultryworld.net)

Eggs with blood spots inside

This is a result of blood escaping the ovarian follicle and getting imbedded in the albumen. The cause is possibly due to the birds being shocked or stressed and will usually correct itself. It is good to note that there are some breeds which are flightier than others and therefore blood spots may be more prominent in these eggs.

Dirty eggs

This is a cause of lack of removal of faeces from the nest boxes, or when a flock has wet litter and pasty droppings. This can be prevented by regular cleaning of the nest boxes and providing flocks with adequately balanced diets to prevent wet droppings.

Soft shelled eggs

These are eggs with a thin layer of calcium deposit on the egg membrane and are soft to the touch. It can usually occur in the first pullet egg and in older birds. Other possible causes are diets which are too high in phosphorus, mouldy feed, salty feed and feed contaminated with mycotoxins. Provide flocks with a balanced diet from a reputable animal feed company, such as Tiger Animal Feeds.

Eggs with watery albumen

This is more frequent in older hens and in hotter weather. Most of the time eggs develop watery albumen because they are stale and have been kept in a warm area for more than two weeks. Eggs should be stored in cool controlled temperatures to preserve the freshness.

Wrinkled eggs

These eggs appear to have wrinkled or rigid surfaces which is caused by overcrowding and stressed hens. This may also be seen in flocks suffering from infectious bronchitis.

Calcium deposits on eggs

This can be caused by defective shell glands or disturbances during the calcification process of egg formation. Excessive calcium or Vitamin D in the diet may also be a possible cause of these deposits. Make sure a balanced feed is given to the birds.



Soft shell eggs. (backyardchickens.com)



Egg with calcium deposits. (fresheggsdaily.bog)

Many other abnormalities may have been noticed, but these are very few and not common in flocks. If chickens are kept in clean non-stressful conditions and given a balanced diet with fresh clean water, then these problems will be avoided.

For more information contact Rowena Blanco, Animal Nutritionist of Tiger Animal Feeds, on (+260)977-991-847 or visit their website on www.tigerfeeds.com

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Hydroponics 4:

Time to start planting

by Natasha Pretorius

A hydroponic system is a healthy and productive way to grow the best vegetables and fruit. Some vegetables may need a bit more effort and love to grow successfully. In this article, we look at different types of plants and how to grow them in a hydroponic system.

Once you have decided which hydroponic system you want to use, and have set it up, the fun begins, now you get to plant.

The best plants to grow with hydroponics

Leavy greens are an excellent way to start growing plants in your hydroponic system. Plants like kale, bok choy, watercress, any type of salad green, spinach, and herbs grow well.

Kale:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 50 - 55 days



	Recommended system	Light	Days to maturity
Lettuce	Water culture	Full to partial sun	25 – 60
Spinach	Water culture	Full to partial sun	28 - 55
Kale	Water culture	Full to partial sun	50 - 55
Arugula	Water culture	Full to partial sun	40 - 45
Basil	Water culture	Full sun	65 - 70
Parsley	Water culture	Full sun	60 - 75
Cilantro	Water culture	Full to partial sun	55 - 75
Dill	Water culture	Full sun	40 - 60
Mint	Water culture	Full sun	30 - 40

Lettuce:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 25 - 60 days



Spinach:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 28 - 55 days



Arugula:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 40 - 45 days



Basil:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 65 - 70 days



Parsley:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 60 - 75 days



Cilantro:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 55 - 75 days



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Dill:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 40 - 60 days



Mint:
Recommended system: Water culture
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 30 - 40 days



Other vegetables and plants

Leafy greens are not the only plants you can grow. You can cultivate different fruits, vegetables and plants using hydroponics as well. You can grow strawberries, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, radishes, beans, marigolds, and petunias, among others.

Strawberries:
Recommended system: Nutrient film technique (NFT)
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 28 - 42 days



Tomatoes:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 75 - 90 days



Peppers:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 70 - 85 days



Eggplant:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 105 - 130 days



Cucumbers:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full to partial sun
Days to maturity: 56 - 60 days



Radishes:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 30 - 60 days



Beans:
Recommended system: Wick system, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 50 - 60 days



Marigolds:
Recommended system: Water culture, ebb-and-flow
Light: Full sun
Days to maturity: 56 - 63 days



Ensure you know the different nutrient needs for each plant and use the correct lighting if you are in an area where you cannot rely on the sun. All fruiting crops like tomatoes and peppers need pollination. This needs to be kept in mind when planting.

Challenging plants

Some plants like blueberries and maize are more challenging to grow with hydroponic systems.

Maize needs overhead space to grow, and this makes it impractical for most hydroponic systems. Blueberries need the correct lighting to grow and make fruit, and they take time to mature but it may be worth it in the end.

Keep in mind

Whatever you choose to plant, keep in mind that different plants have different needs. Space is also a factor; you need to know how much space your plants will need.

Research the plants you want to grow to ensure you have the right system and the correct shade cloth for the light spectrum you need. Leafy greens prefer cooler light and fruiting plants prefer a warmer spectrum.

Reference:
https://www.thespruce.com/

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Good green maize option

DKC80-33 (TAMANGA)

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SEED INFORMATION
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Prolific hybrid
Good overall disease tolerance (very good to excellent for GLS, NLB, MSV, diploaia and gibberella ear rots)
Good green maize option

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MASSEY FERGUSON

Massey Ferguson delivers comfort and efficiency to Namibia

by Ashleigh Schubert

Georg Sievers, a dedicated farmer located 40 km north of Grootfontein, manages a diverse agricultural operation that includes cattle, maize, sunflowers, and vegetables. His family's farming legacy began in 1934 when his grandfather purchased the farm. From a young age, Georg developed an affinity for Massey Ferguson tractors, starting with the first Massey Ferguson 188 acquired by his father.

In 1992, Georg expanded his fleet with two new tractors: a 290 and a 399. His current equipment lineup includes a 6711 primarily used for spraying and land preparation, and the recently acquired MF 8S, which excels in soil preparation and deep ripping. Georg praises the MF 8S for its ride comfort, spacious cabin, quiet interior, and impressive engine power combined with efficient fuel consumption.

Georg also highlights the performance of his 6713R model, particularly appreciating its Dyna-4 gearbox. This feature allows for precise speed selection tailored to each implement, enhancing tillage efficiency and economy. "The smooth gear shifting and the ability to choose the right speed for each task make the 6713R indispensable for spraying and planting," Georg notes.

Susie Sievers, Georg's wife, shares the family's excitement whenever a new tractor arrives on the farm. "The children always run to see the new addition," she says.

Timely maize planting is crucial in Namibia, with December being the optimal period. "Rain can necessitate round-the-clock work to complete planting, making larger tractors essential for covering extensive areas efficiently," Georg explains.

Preventive maintenance is a priority for Georg, who services his tractors before each season. He appreciates the support from his local Massey Ferguson distributor, Otjiwarongo Motors & Tractors, which offers backup tractors if needed. "It's reassuring to know they provide support during critical times," he adds.

Otjiwarongo Motors & Tractors, a family business founded in 1983, has been a reliable partner for the Sievers family. Thorsten Kopp, the Sales Manager, notes that they have service teams covering the entire country, from the south to the Okavango. The longstanding relationship between the Sievers family and Otjiwarongo Motors & Tractors dates back to the days when Georg and Thorsten's fathers did business together.

"We maintain a strong relationship with Otjiwarongo Motors & Tractors. They provide prompt parts delivery when needed. Compared to other brands, the cost of ownership for Massey Ferguson tractors is relatively low, with affordable and readily available parts," Georg remarks.



The MF tractor is ahead of its time, excelling in comfort, connectivity, user-friendliness, power efficiency, output, and low operating costs.



The MF 6700 series is perfect for operations that require a highly productive and economical tractor.

Thorsten emphasizes the central role of Massey Ferguson tractors in their operations. "The tractor is the heart of our business, and Massey Ferguson consistently meets our needs. We are proud to partner with Massey Ferguson," he states.

Massey Ferguson tractors are renowned for their comfort, connectivity, user-friendliness, power efficiency, output, fuel efficiency, and low operating costs. Thorsten also observes a shift towards high horsepower tractors and precision farming in Grootfontein. "Massey Ferguson high horsepower tractors offer exceptional fuel efficiency, achieving the same output with lower input costs due to the synergy between the engine, gearbox, and hydraulics," he explains.



Thorsten Kopp has been working at Otjiwarongo Motors & Tractors for ten years, and is an expert in the field.

For more information, visit www.tractorsnamibia.com, email massey@afol.com.na, or call (+264) 67-303041.

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Georg Sievers and his wife Susie.



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Namibia lifts ban on poultry imports from South Africa

The Namibian chicken industry is rejoicing following the government's decision to lift a one-year prohibition on importing chickens from neighbouring South Africa. This decision, which has been well received by the Poultry Producers' Association of Namibia (PPA), provides much-needed relief and lays the groundwork for a more stable poultry market.

Louis Kleynhans, the Chairperson of PPA, conveyed his organisation's backing for the decision, highlighting the significance of biosecurity. He said they will only approve the imported chicken if it comes from South African farms certified as free of avian influenza and if it enters Namibia through proper legal channels.

This policy change comes after Namibia's Directorate of Veterinary Services issued an official notice in mid-May. Albertina Shilongo, the Chief Veterinary Officer, explained that poultry meat imports will resume. She emphasised that only chickens free from disease and derived from live birds raised on bio-secure South African farms will be permitted.







Avian influenza outbreak

The prohibition on imports, which was put into place in September 2023, resulted from an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in South Africa. The poultry industry in Namibia was greatly affected by this outbreak. Louis Kleynhans views lifting the ban as an important measure to support local production and guarantee ongoing availability of chicken.

He stresses that import quotas will be upheld to avoid an influx of imported chicken that could harm local producers. The outbreak of HPAI had a devastating impact on Namibian poultry producers. It has been reported that Quantum Foods, a significant player in the industry, culled approximately two million chickens to control the disease. Astral Foods, another leading producer, calculated that the total cost of the outbreak was around R220 million. These statistics emphasise the considerable financial burden of the outbreak on the Namibian poultry sector.

Namibia heavily depends on importing poultry from South Africa, consuming about 2 500 tonnes of chicken every month. The removal of the ban is anticipated to stabilise the market by boosting the total supply of chicken. This could consequently result in more competitive pricing for consumers. Nevertheless, the implementation of import quotas will guarantee fairness and safeguard the concerns of local manufacturers who have made significant investments in the sector.

Implementation of the ban lift

The lifting of the ban presents the opportunity for Namibian and South African poultry producers to work together. Exchanging effective biosecurity protocols and disease prevention measures could be advantageous for both sectors. Namibia could benefit from South Africa's expertise in managing the HPAI outbreak to enhance its biosecurity measures and prevent potential future outbreaks.

Although the removal of the ban is a positive development for both consumers and producers, there are still some obstacles that need to be addressed. Strict adherence to the biosecurity regulations set out by the Directorate of Veterinary Services is crucial to prevent the reintroduction of HPAI in Namibia. It will be essential to maintain constant monitoring and take quick action if there are any suspected outbreaks.

Additionally, the successful implementation of the ban lift depends on efficiently controlling the import quotas. It is important to establish quotas that ensure a consistent influx of imported chicken while also safeguarding domestic production. Effective communication and cooperation among the government, the PPA, and local producers will be key to attaining this equilibrium.

The removal of the import restriction on South African chicken represents a major advancement for the poultry sector in Namibia. It has the potential to create a more secure market, promote greater competition, and potentially lead to lower prices for consumers. Nevertheless, it will be crucial to maintain biosecurity, effectively manage import quotas, and promote collaboration between stakeholders to guarantee the lasting success of this policy change.

Source: https://www.bizcommunity.com/article/namibia-lifts-ban-on-poultry-imports-from-south-africa-784922a

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Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	2 Aukam *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	3 Koës *- Weaner Auction*	4 Nico binneman Dorpers Production Auction *Farm: toekoms Aranos*	5 Mariental *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*
8	9 Leonardville *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	10 Kentani *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle* Kalkrand	11 Gemsbokpan wes *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle* Aranos	12 JJ Blaauw *- Van rooy/ boergoat* Gochas haruchas *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*
15	16 Koës *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	17 Mariental *- Weaner Auction*	18 Keetmanshoop *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	19 Kalahari Genetics Jimmy O'kennedy *- Van Rooy/ Boergoat/Dorper* Walace Theron *- Van Rooy/ Wdorper* **Conradie genetics** *- Meatmaster* **Stampriet**
22	23 Monica *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	24 Aranos *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*	25	26 Mariental *- Sheep, Goat, Cattle*
29	30	31 Geikous *- Weaner Auction*		



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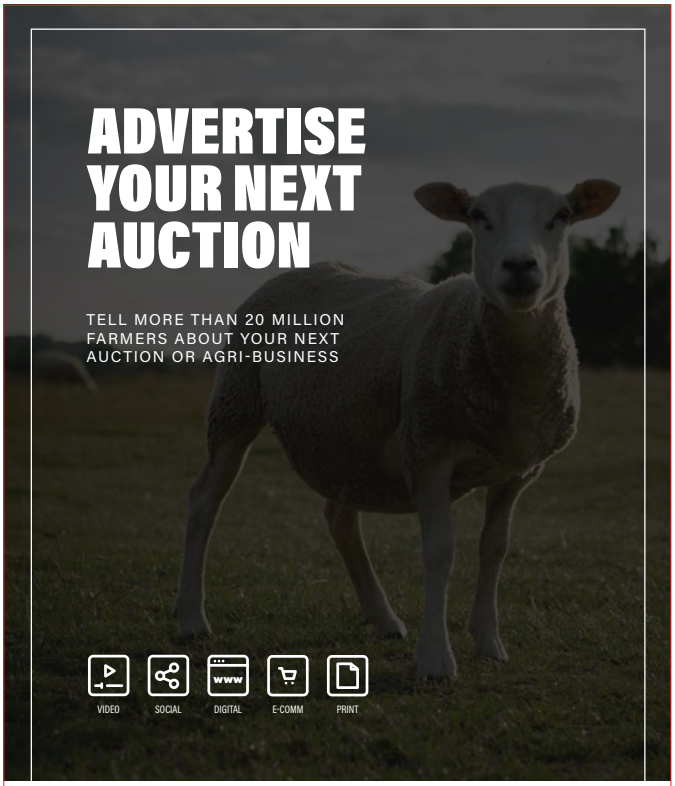

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Technews

The latest in agricultural technology from around the world

by Annemarie Bremner

A robotic dog that autonomously waters plants

A group of tech enthusiasts in Italy known as B-AROL-O has developed a robotic dog that autonomously tends to plants by activating an onboard sprinkler system. Its technology facilitates plant monitoring by distinguishing between healthy and poor leaf conditions.

More developments are needed before it can be applied practically in agriculture, but even great ideas are sometimes born small.

The B-AROL-O Team is a group of friends who work or have previously worked for an Italian company in the packaging industry. Barolo is also a wine region. The dog is called FREISA, an acronym for Four-legged Robot Ensuring Intelligent Sprinkler Automation. With this new integration of robotics, AI, and agriculture, the team says it aims to introduce a new era of smart gardening solutions.

The robotic dog works by locomoting using its four limbs. A camera module is used to observe the surrounding environment. Plants are evaluated using AI and watered by FREISA if they look too dry. "Our robot demonstrates good abilities in identifying a target plant, navigating towards it, and examining its leaves before precisely adjusting its position to efficiently water the plant", Gianluca Teti, member of the group, says.

Initially, the team contemplated using vineyards as a setting for the dog. However, this choice presented certain challenges. Primarily, the vine leaves grow at a height of at least 40 cm from the ground, significantly higher than the intended height for the dog robot they planned to employ.

Also, the terrain where vines are typically cultivated, notably in Italy, tends to be uneven, posing navigation difficulties for a robot. Therefore, the team chose a more controlled environment – a small garden with tomato plants. But, the team says, this decision does not rule out the possibility of continuing the project and potentially introducing the robotic dog to vineyards in the future.



FREISA is a dog robot that can autonomously water your vegetable garden. (Photo: B-AROL-O)

The team's objective was to assess a plant's condition by analysing the state of its leaves and stems. The team had to collect a vast array of images and then train various networks and models.

The team believes that Quadruped Legged Platforms are ideally suited for a range of unstructured outdoor applications due to the ability to navigate complex terrain. They ruled out creating a robot running on wheels and tracks, noting that it would be poor at clearing obstacles over rough ground.

The group also considered a quadcopter but felt its battery and payload would be poor. The team built the robot for less than US $500, using open-source software. FREISA won the Grand Prize in the 2023 OpenCV AI Competition. The team has already identified potential improvements such as using the OAK-D Lite's stereo camera to estimate a target's distance. (Source: Future Farming)

Siloking: Etruck now bigger and better

Kverneland's latest news is about the updates to the Siloking diet feeder range include a stepless gearbox for the augers on the trailed models, a revamped version of the battery powered Etruck, while the diesel-fuelled machines can now run on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO).

The Variospeed stepless gearbox on the TrailedLine two and three auger mixers is said to take a lot less torque to get things moving and therefore reduce horsepower demands. Three predefined auger speeds can be selected for cutting, mixing and feeding out with the push of a button, along with the option of remote activation from the machine loading the mix.

On the self-propelled Etruck capacity has been increased by swapping the single auger body for a twin which can handle loads ranging from 12 to 20 m^3. The lead-acid battery pack has been changed to one with lithium ion phosphorous capable of two to four mixes without recharging and projected lifespan of 3 000 to 5 000 full charge cycles.

Prices start at £188 000 (R4,5 million) for the 12 m^3 version. Back in 2019, Siloking announced it had sold over 100 of the battery powered feeders which were shown as a concept at EuroTier in 2016. Then the hopper capacity was 8 m^3, increasing to 10 and 14 m^3 in 2017. (Source: profi).



On the self-propelled Etruck, capacity has been increased by swapping the single auger body for a twin which can handle loads ranging from 12 to 20 m^3.


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Members of the WeLASER consortium are monitoring the functions of their prototype in field conditions.

WeLASER: Another step closer to pesticide-free agriculture

After three years of work, an international partnership involving eight EU countries has released a precision weeding tool proving that herbicide-free agriculture is at hand.

The partnership formed by research centres, universities, private companies, and farmers' organisations from Spain, Germany, Denmark, France, Poland, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands has completed the first stage of the development of the precision weeding prototype tool using laser to eradicate weeds. The aim is to improve productivity and competitiveness of crops, while eliminating health risks and the adverse environmental effects of chemicals.

The prototype includes an autonomous vehicle that drives through the crop and is equipped with an advanced detection system based on artificial intelligence (AI) through image acquisition and data processing, which allows it to distinguish and localise the centre of growth of the weed to be eradicated. Once targeted through the scanner, it directs the high-powered fibre laser source to that meristem. This fast modulation concept allows precise energy pulses to be directed for highly efficient weed treatment. Data is managed by a cloud computing architecture and the system includes the IoT technology.

Although this project is currently concluding this first phase of development, further work will be needed, for example, to reduce the time required to work in the field, to make the prototype easier to handle and connect, and to reduce production costs to achieve a marketable model on the market.

Beyond the development of the prototype, this project has resulted in the development of different innovations with multiple applications including:

- A high-power fibre laser source for the control of adventitious weeds through precise energy pulses.
- An innovative pump and cooling concept that minimises the energy demand of the laser for the weeding process.
- An improved power supply system for autonomous robotic platforms.
- An intelligent navigation manager for autonomous robots applicable to precision farming that enables navigation throughout the farm, not limited exclusively to the crop field.
- The integration of different artificial intelligence (AI) methodologies to identify various types of crops, including wide and narrow crops.
- An AI-based laser weed control implement that enables a wide working range for individualised plant treatment in crops of different types, while complying with all safety regulations required for working with laser technology.

In Europe alone, around 130 million tonnes of synthetic herbicides are used each year (not counting other chemicals). These substances do not discriminate between beneficial plants and insects in the soil that are not their target and can have effects on the health of animals and humans.

In addition, weeds are developing resistance, which means that existing herbicides are becoming less and less effective.

González de Santos, one of the team members, says: "The WeLASER consortium is motivated to adopt smarter farming methods and build more sustainable food production systems while preserving the environment and health. WeLASER opens up a reliable and safe option and offers breakthroughs to solve a global problem."



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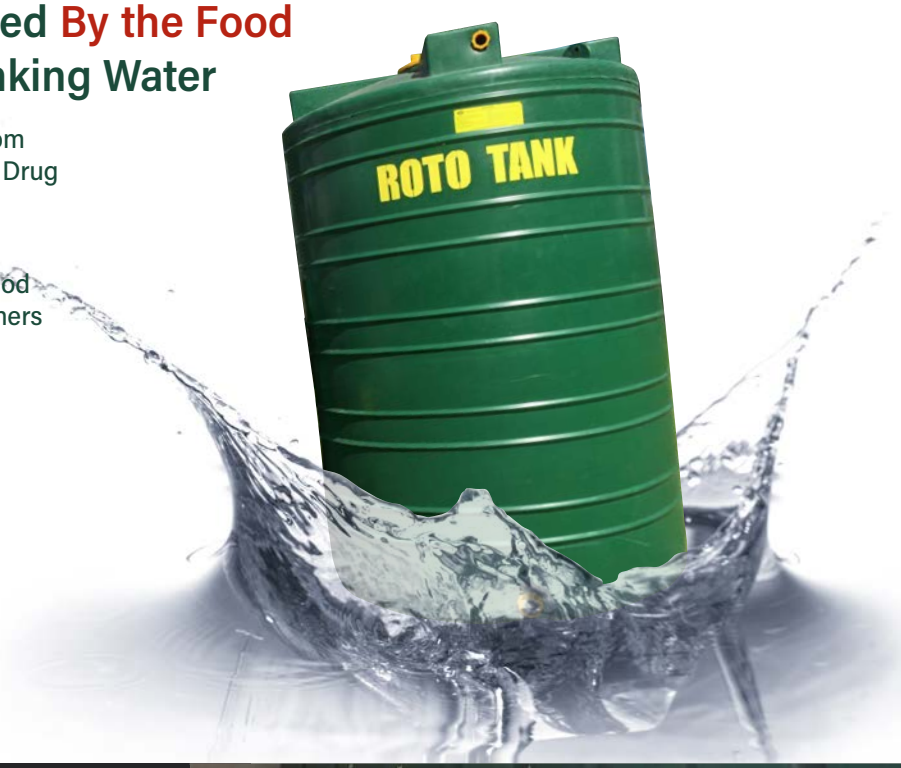

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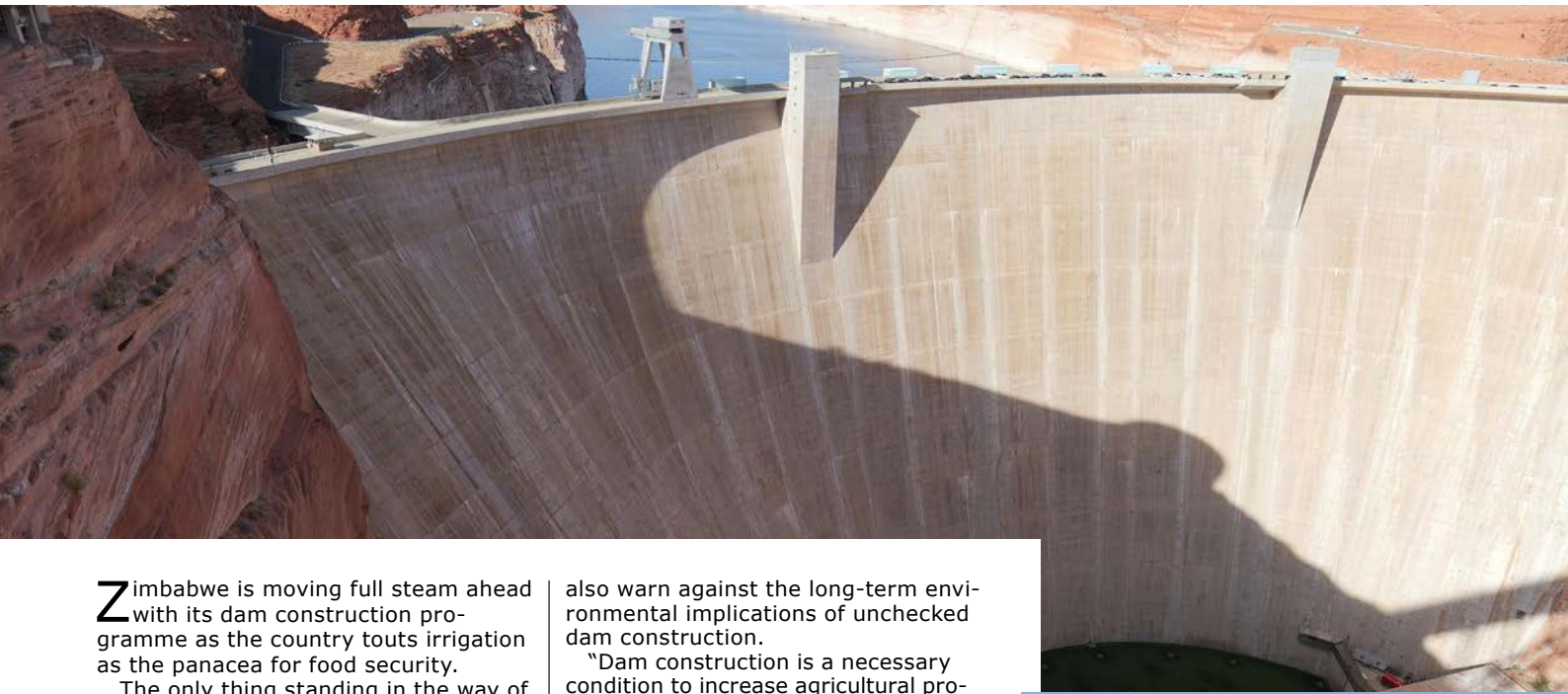
Zimbabwe's dam construction a slow drip

by Marko Phiri



Zimbabwe is moving full steam ahead with its dam construction programme as the country touts irrigation as the panacea for food security.

The only thing standing in the way of those ambitions is funding.

In March, government announced that it was accelerating the construction of thirteen major multi-million-dollar dam projects, raising hopes that one of the largest infrastructure projects in the country was on course to meet deadline.

The construction of new dams has stalled for years because of lack of adequate finance, but successive poor harvests have renewed that commitment.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa announced government was envisaging the completion of all major dam construction projects by 2025.

Authorities say the rehabilitation of old and the construction of large new dams is a response to climate uncertainty that has led to a cycle of droughts and compromised national food production.

Zimbabwe already has a vast irrigation infrastructure, most of which was destroyed during violent land seizures more than two decades ago. In the previous dispensation most commercial farms also had small dams that ensured year-round agriculture activity.

Government is making spirited efforts to reclaim that infrastructure, and while experts agree on the utility of dams in the agriculture sector, they also warn against the long-term environmental implications of unchecked dam construction.

"Dam construction is a necessary condition to increase agricultural production in the face of climate change. One step in adapting to a changing climate is the adoption of irrigated agriculture, and dam construction will allow farmers to have access to water for irrigation purposes," said Norman Mupaso, an agricultural economist at the Midlands State University.

However, such huge projects come with a caveat, researchers contend.

"It is important to acknowledge that dam construction may also have negative consequences, such as displacement of communities, alteration of ecosystems, and impacts on downstream water quality and sedimentation. There is a need to carefully plan and conduct environmental assessments, and mitigation measures to minimise these adverse effects," Norman said.

According to the Minister of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development, Anxious Masuka, these dam projects will enable 350 000 hectares to be under irrigation by 2025.

"When it comes to investment in irrigation, we are going to accelerate investments now that we have the water bodies. We have to impound water. So, it is an ongoing programme to complete dams under construction," Mthuli Ncube, the Minister of Finance, has told state media.

However, surrounding farming communities are on record expressing reluctance to relocate to make way for dam construction, raising concerns regarding the relocation plans for the beneficiaries of the dams.

"There is a need for proper planning before construction begins so that all the negatives are taken care of. I also think there is a need to think of smart agriculture and technologies that can lessen the disturbance to the natural environment," Munyanyiwashe Shumba, a Zimbabwean PhD researcher at the University of Warsaw in Poland whose focus includes climate change, says.

"Also, construction of dams might mean relocation of local communities to a new and usually overcrowded environment which again brings a lot of 'environmental ills' in the long term," Munyanyiwashe said.

Despite the upbeat projections of completing the dam construction projects, local municipalities such as Bulawayo, the country's second city, have expressed displeasure that funds allocated by treasury are not enough.

The government says it is aiming at a USD2 billion drive to rehabilitate and construct dams across the country, but history has shown that progress



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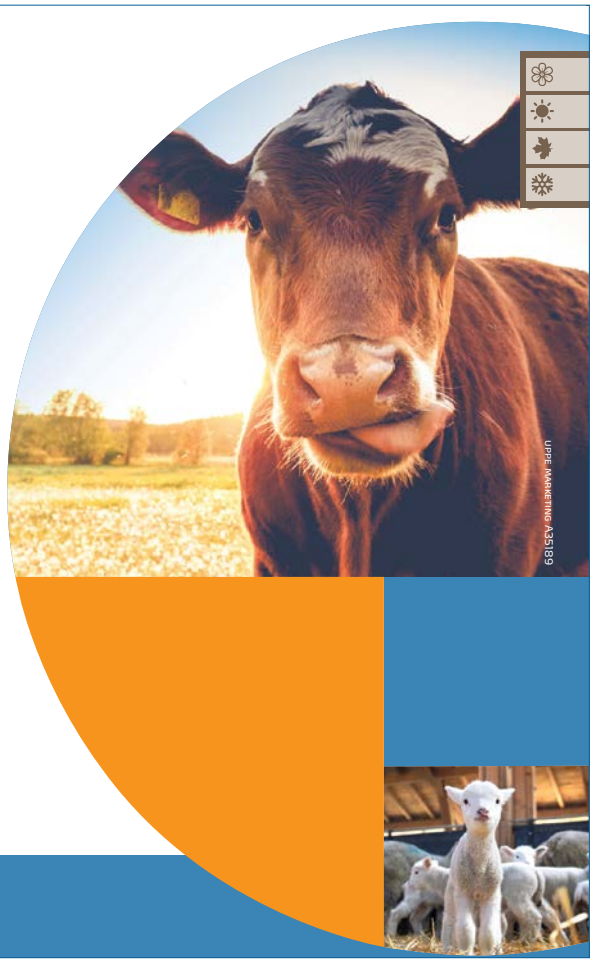

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has been marred by treasury delays to release funds for the dam projects. Where treasury has released funds, it has proven to be inadequate.

Bulawayo Mayor, David Coltart, has described the 2024 budgetary allocation of ZWL369 billion (USD67 million) as "too little" as an estimated USD400 million is needed for the region's major dam project.

Coupled with an inability to attract private money towards dam construction, the country's ambitions to spur agriculture production and also provide potable water to millions could be years away, and as Mr Coltart noted, the city of Bulawayo cannot wait another decade.

"More dams will definitely lead to increased agriculture production, that is if dam construction is accompanied by installation of irrigation infrastructure for water intake, conveyance and infield irrigation," said Oliver Masimba, a climate change researcher at the University of Zimbabwe.

"Ready water availability from dams will ensure timeliness of field operations and increased cropping intensity," Oliver added.

For the country's smallholder farmers reeling under the impact of poor rains, the completion of dam construction could not be more urgent.



According to Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development Minister Anxious Masuka, Zimbabwe's dam projects will have 350 000 hectares under irrigation by 2025.





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GMOs return to haunt Zimbabwe

by Marko Phiri

Zimbabwe's long running efforts to ensure food security have returned to haunt the country regarding the adoption of GMOs.

In the aftermath of a devastating drought that has left millions insecure in terms of food supply, and after subsistence farmers watched as their crops wilted, how the country deals with the food crisis has become even more urgent.

Long-time president, the late Robert Mugabe did not disguise his hostility towards GMOs, and government officials lined up to persuade members of the public about how GMOs posed harmful threats to their health.

It is in that regard that the Zimbabwean government has always questioned the science of GMOs, despite importing millions of tonnes of yellow genetically modified maize from Kenya during the 1992 drought.

However, as the country attempts to navigate the effects of the El Niño induced food crisis, GMOs are back on the agenda, with officials begrudgingly discussing the importation of genetically modified maize.

In March, the Agriculture Minister announced that private players could import maize as part of broader government efforts to ensure "no one goes hungry," as the country's President put it.

"The private sector must continue to import, and they will continue to import maize for human consumption, and we also said that if they wished to import genetically modified maize, they can do so," Agriculture Minister Anxious Masuka said in March this year.

This is despite the long-standing position that the country's adoption of GMOs shall be informed by scientific evidence regarding its safety for human consumption.

Local commercial farmers are not allowed to grow GMO maize, with a warning that stiff penalties await those who violate that decree.

Last month, Vangelis Habitats, Deputy Minister of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development, confirmed that private sector players were allowed to import genetically modified maize.

He however maintained that such GMOs were not to be sold to farmers for planting.

"We are allowing GMO maize to be imported in the country, but what we do not want is for it to be distributed to our farmers," the Deputy Minister said.

"We believe that if any of this maize is sold to our farmers, then that person who sold it to the individual will be prosecuted, whether it is the farmer buying or the seller. We shall prosecute both," he added.

The government insists this is not a policy shift regarding GMOs, but the extent of the food crisis is exposing what critics say are policy inconsistencies as the country attempts to address hunger that has affected millions.

"As Zimbabwe tackles this complex issue, it must carefully consider the long-term sustainability, ethical considerations, and the interests of farmers and consumers to make informed decisions that promote both food security and the overall well-being of its population," wrote Equity Axis, a local financial media firm offering business intelligence, economic and equity research in a May update.

"Collaborative efforts and innovative solutions are critical to navigating the difficult path ahead and ensuring long-term resilience in the face of climate change and its associated consequences," the firm added.

Other African researchers have also called for further research in ways to feed the continent's growing population.

The African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) has noted that even in countries such as Zimbabwe where GMOs are banned, farmers could still access GMO seeds without the knowledge of authorities, making it more difficult to monitor.

Despite permitting the importation of GMO maize to address the impact of the





Despite permitting the importation of GMO maize to address the impact of the drought, the government says the country has enough grain to feed itself.



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drought, the government says the country has enough grain to feed itself.

"We already have substantial quantities of stock in our strategic grain reserves, and we strongly believe that that is enough until next year's harvest and next year's summer harvest," Deputy Minister Habitats told local media.

This is despite earlier concerns raised by his boss, Minister Anxious Masuka, that: "Food security outlook April 2024 to March 2025 – this is what we deliberated on, and we said that the private sector must continue to import, and they will continue to import maize for human consumption."

Humanitarian agencies say millions will require food assistance, and the government estimates that more than USD2 billion will be required to meet the country's food deficit needs.
And as the GMO debate returns to haunt Zimbabwe, it remains to be seen how the government navigates this contentious issue.



Humanitarian agencies say millions will require food assistance, and the government estimates that more than USD2 billion will be required to meet the country's food deficit needs.







Zimbabwean government has always questioned the science of GMOs, despite importing millions of tonnes of yellow genetically modified maize from Kenya during the 1992 drought.



Greens shortage stalks Zimbabwe

by Marko Phiri

Zimbabwe's agriculture commodities market is experiencing mixed fortunes as the country struggles with ensuring basic products are not only available but affordable amid currency volatility.

The country's open air vegetable markets have in recent years become the pulse of the performance of the agriculture sector, proving insights into both commodity availability and pricing.

It is in these open-air markets where virtually every agriculture produce is found all year round, but in recent years with diminished commercial agriculture production, it has become normal to expect shortages of some commodities.

While the country once boasted a thriving winter cropping season, consumers have found themselves having to chase commodities that range from onions and tomatoes to potatoes, raising concerns about the long-term production of staple agriculture commodities.

In a country known for regular shortages of basic commodities such as mealie meal, the shortage of green produce has come as a surprise to many consumers.

"I do not think it is normal to have a shortage of onions or tomatoes," said Shyelt Guti, a Bulawayo housewife. "But it has become a fact of life," she said, expressing what has become popular sentiment here.

And the shortages have meant that when available, basics such as tomatoes and onions are more than double their regular price, not exactly as a result of the country's volatile inflationary pressures, but shortages from the farmgate.

Produce such as potatoes have also hit the skids, with supermarkets that usually stock the tubers running on empty.

As part of efforts to address these challenges, the Zimbabwe Mercantile Exchange (ZMX) was set up in 2021 to enable speedier availability of agriculture commodities in local markets.

However, farmers expected to use the exchange have largely stayed away, with ZMX officials noting that this is because most farmers are under contract and cannot sell directly to willing buyers in the agriculture commodities exchange.

Contract farming has proven controversial in Zimbabwe with some farmers accused of breaching their con-



tracts and selling to private buyers, resulting in market shortages.

According to ZMX, the idea is to attract self-financed farmers, but in a country where basic commodities find their way into the market through unofficial channels, this agri-business model has been a hard sell.

The Grain Marketing Board has tried the same model of persuading farmers to sell to the parastatal to boost national food stocks, but low prices have meant producers chase higher prices from private buyers.

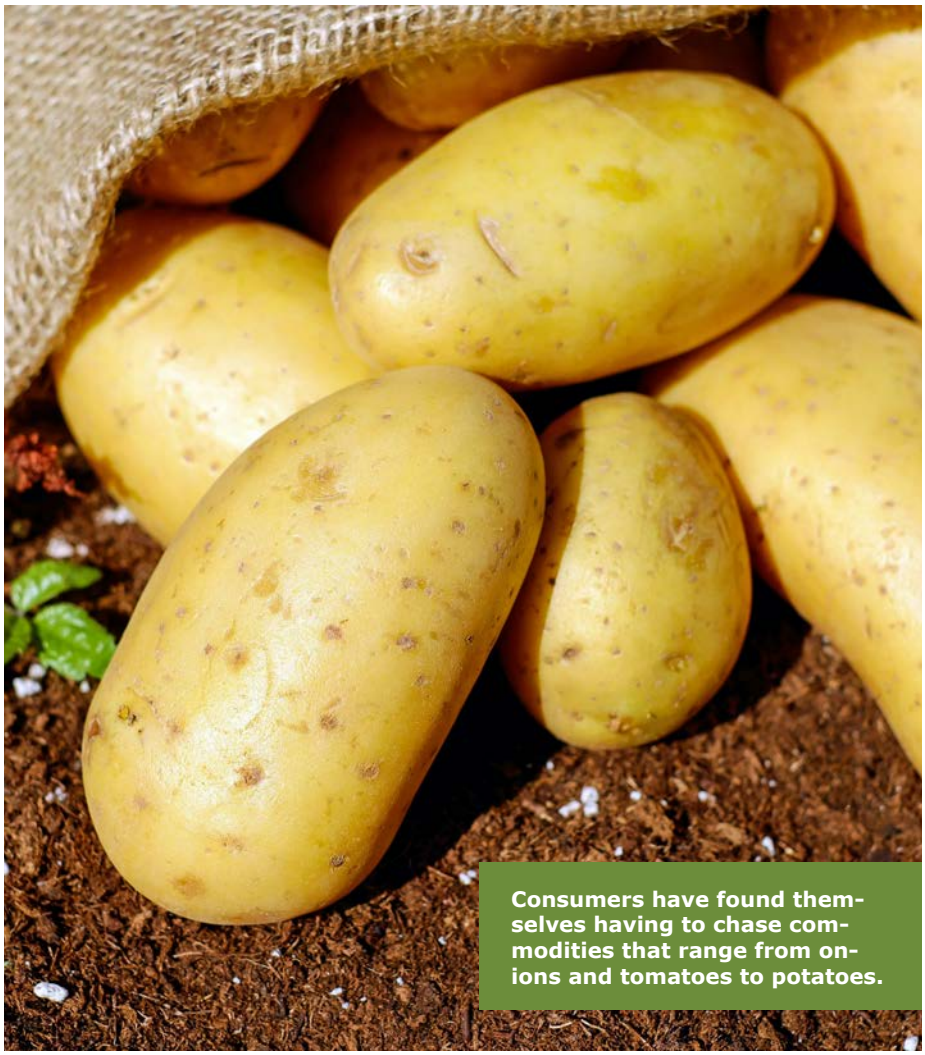
The Zimbabwe Mercantile Exchange also seeks to promote cross-border trade of agriculture commodities, but those ambitions remain tall as producers must meet international standards to pass muster.

For small scale green produce farmers such as Nathan Bhebhe who grows staples such as tomatoes, onions, cabbages and chomolia (a type of kale), the shortage of these staples is both a boon and a cause for concern.

"There is growing demand for vegetables as many farmers are failing to service their infrastructure," Nathan said.

"Seasonal vegetables have also suffered because of hostile weather. There has been too much heat for vegetables to thrive, and from what I have seen some farmers have simply given up," he said.

Despite the apparent innovations to promote farmer produce such as ZMX, there has been little on the ground in terms of interventions to ensure consistent farm to market delivery.



Consumers have found themselves having to chase commodities that range from onions and tomatoes to potatoes.



Authorities issued a public statement assuring consumers that there was no shortage of sugar in the country.

The Zimbabwe Farmers Union (ZFU) has raised concerns about the lack of adequate financing for farmers to make their own decisions that will encourage production and participation in the commodities market.

For Bhebhe and others who finance their green gardens from their own pockets, shortages of commodities have not presented an opportunity to increase production.

"We have the land, but we obviously need financial support to supply the market. There is never a time when there is no demand for tomatoes or onions," he said.

Consumers have raised concerns about a shortage of vegetables that seem to have joined the list of other hard-to-find basic commodities.

Recently, the authorities issued a public statement assuring consumers that there was no shortage of sugar in the country.

It has become common in Zimbabwe that once a commodity is rumoured to be in short supply, consumers hoard the commodity, creating what government says are "artificial shortages".

In the agriculture commodities however, perishables are difficult to hoard,



and once shortages emerge due to various reasons, authorities cannot blame it on hoarding.



Zimbabwe's dairy churns with increased milk production

by Marko Phiri

Amid a troubled agriculture industry, Zimbabwe's dairy industry is weathering the storm with increased milk production.

Drought has decimated beef cattle, leaving thousands dead, but the dairy sector is experiencing a resurgence, according to numbers released by the Agriculture Ministry.

The Dairy Services Department, which falls under the Ministry of Agriculture, says the country had seen a 21% jump in the production of milk compared to the same period last year. In 2022, the country produced 91 million litres of milk, lower than targets to exceed 100 million litres.

However, these numbers remain significantly lower than what local farmers produced at the peak of the country's agriculture glory years where annual milk production reportedly stood at up to 200 million litres.

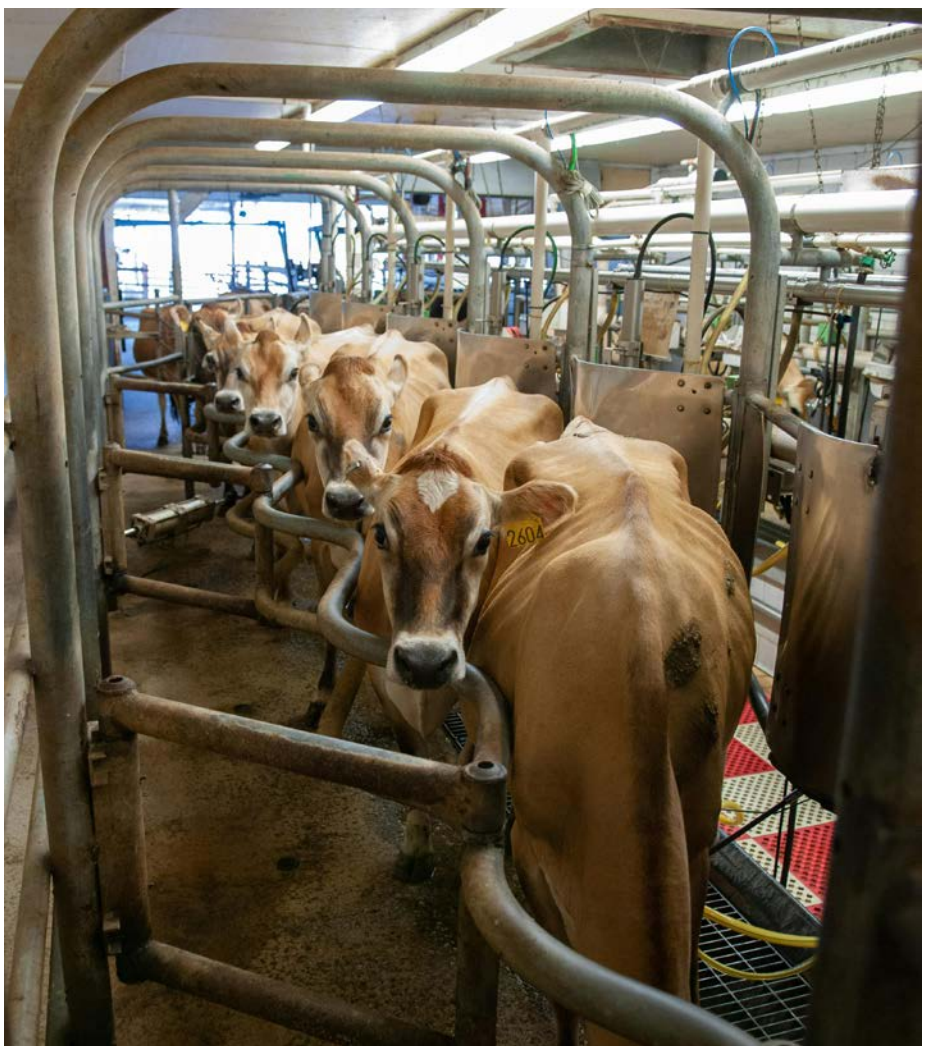
Dairy production remains a highly specialised agriculture sector, and while the country has struggled with cattle disease and death that has affected beef production, the dairy sector has maintained a steady population.

The current national dairy cattle herd count stands at more than thirty-five thousand.

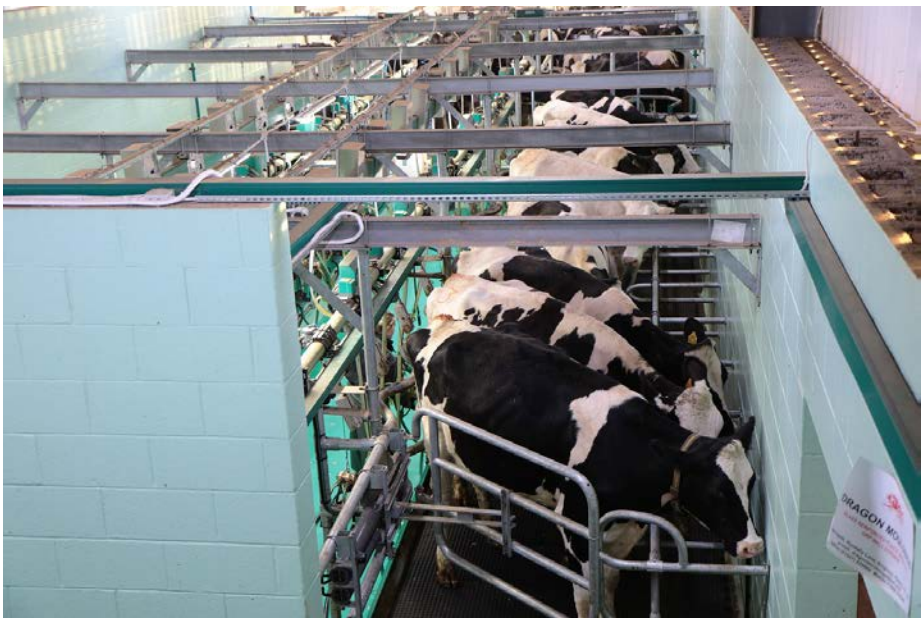
Under the Livestock Recovery and Growth Plan, the agriculture sector is aiming to boost dairy cows to forty thousand by end of 2025.

Zimbabwe is a beneficiary of support from the European Union aimed at smallholder dairy farmers to the tune of USD7 million, and it made a difference.

However, when the EU initiative was launched in 2021, the target was to produce at least 130 million litres of milk by 2024. Zimbabwe still falls far short of those targets.



The Dairy Farmers Association says its mission is to raise the national average production of milk from the 2022 levels of thirteen litres per day per cow, to eighteen litres.





For the dairy industry to maintain momentum, a lot of investment is necessary.

In the first quarter of the year production came to 21 million litres of milk. By extrapolation the total production in 2024 would only reach around 84 million litres.

The EU initiative has become an example of effective sector interventions at a time when the agriculture industry is facing a host of challenges in the aftermath of last season's poor rains. In December 2022, the Zimbabwe Association of Dairy Farmers announced that it was importing one thousand heifers in the coming year as part of efforts to boost milk production.

The association however raised concerns about the costs involved in breeding dairy cattle, noting that feeding them was beyond the reach of many farmers. Also of concern was the cost of medicine for treating the cattle.

These concerns have previously been raised by ministry officials, with the then Agriculture Permanent Secretary, John Bhasera, telling state media last year that the dairy sector was facing numerous viability problems, and among them the high price of stock feed.

The statistics released by the Ministry of Agriculture regarding increased milk production may the potential of the dairy industry to grow further, but it will be difficult to match previous production levels, industry analysts say.



Drought has decimated beef cattle, leaving thousands dead, but the dairy sector is experiencing a resurgence, according to numbers released by the Agriculture Ministry.

"When I was CEO of Dairyboard (once one of the Zimbabwe's leading dairy processing companies), we had factories in seven centres and distribution depots in all urban centres," said economist Eddie Cross.

Dairyboard, an iconic presence in Bulawayo, the country's former industrial centre, is one of thousands of major companies that shut down in the past two decades.

"We handled 250 000 tonnes of fresh milk a year from 600 large-scale producers. After the Fast Track Land Reform programme, it is my understanding that most large-scale dairy producers were closed down and domestic milk production declined to 60 000 tonnes," Eddie said.

The Dairy Farmers Association says its mission is to raise the national average production of milk from the 2022 levels of thirteen litres per day per cow, to eighteen litres.

The association is also aiming to influence what it says is "a conducive policy and regulatory environment for dairy farmers."

This will in turn lead to a more efficient production system, the association says.

Yet for the industry to maintain its current momentum, this will entail massive investment into a sector that is showing tremendous resilience in a flailing economy.

"Since 2017, the large-scale milk production industry has begun to recover. Progress has been made, but we are still only producing a fraction of our needs," Eddie said.



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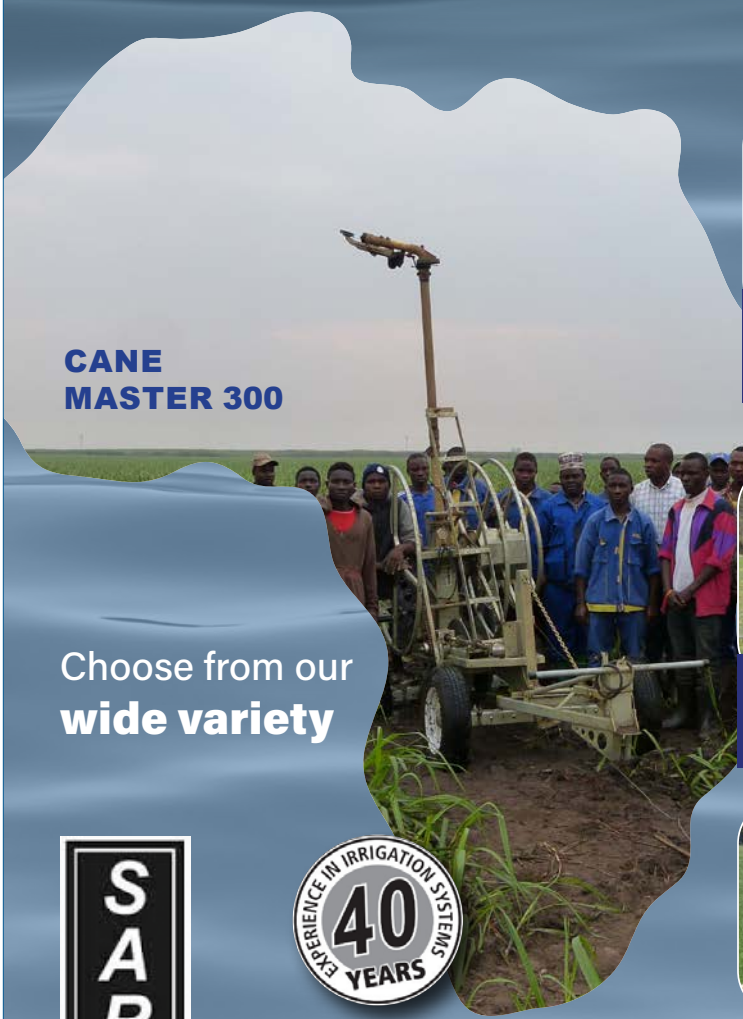

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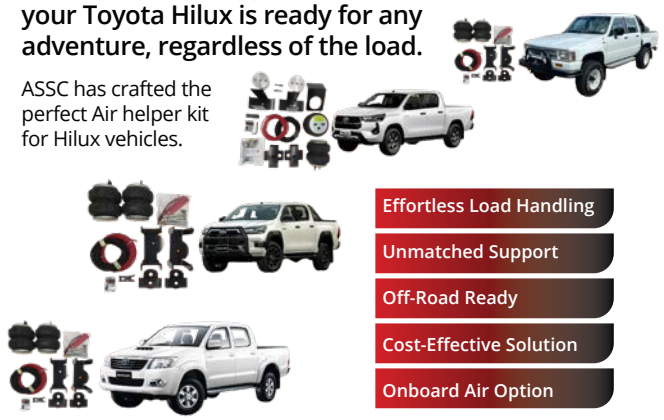

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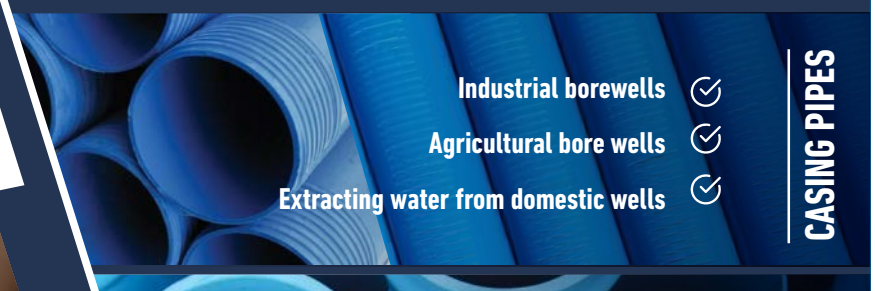

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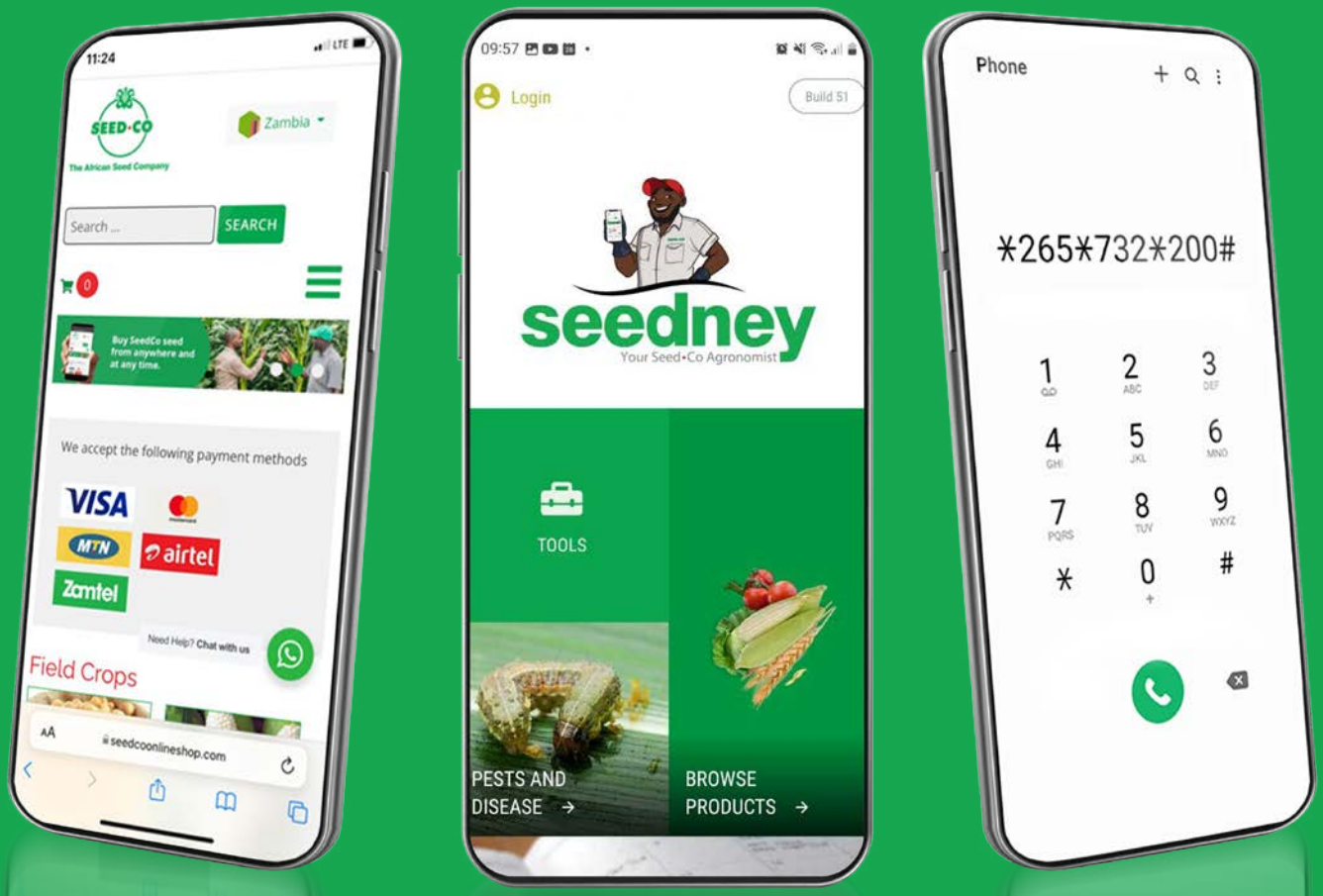

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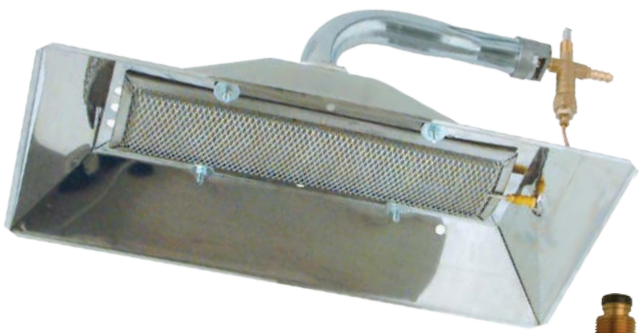

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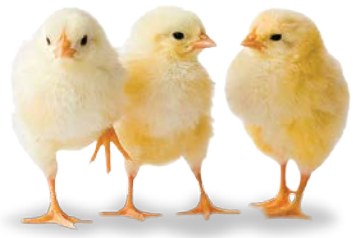

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