

Western Cape launches climate strategy

High level recognition in the region of the devastating effect climate change can have on the agricultural sector

While the Cape region of South Africa, as well as the rest of the country, is still battling to shake off the effects of a devastating drought, the Western Cape Government has launched a climate change response strategy, known as Smart Agri.

Smart Agri was unveiled by Alan Winde, Minister of Economic Opportunities, and Anton Bredell, Minister of Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning.

The comprehensive climate change response plan sets out a roadmap to combat the impact of extreme weather events on the province's agriculture sector.

Minister Winde's department said in a media release that research and climate change modelling showed annual temperatures rising and droughts, floods and heat waves becoming more regular in the province. "These trends highlighted the need for a co-ordinated response from government and the private sector to mitigate the impact of climate change," he explained.

According to the statement, the final assessment and the mitigating steps it proposes is the result of two years of extensive collaboration and engagement between the Western Cape Government (specifically the Departments of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs and Development Planning), the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative and a wide range of stakeholders in the private sector.

The findings show unequivocally that, if not addressed, climate change will have negative impacts on the region. Among the threats to the province's agriculture are higher minimum and maximum temperatures, particularly inland; increases in annual temperatures of 1.5 degrees to 3 degrees; more hot days and fewer cold and frost days; reduced annual rainfall by mid-century; and the possibility of increased rainfall particularly along the south coast.

Minister Winde said that between 2003 and 2008 events such as severe floods, droughts and heat waves cost the region's economy over R3bn.

"This assessment has told us that these events are likely to increase in frequency, underscoring the need for urgent action to protect our sector from the threats of climate change," he said. "If we do not act, potential jobs and revenue are on the line. Scenario planning shows us that if we continue without a co-ordinated response, the knock-on effect will also mean increased food prices."

Minister Bredell agreed that extreme weather events are threatening food security and economic growth: "We have many vulnerable communities facing extreme levels of poverty, as well as economic, health and housing challenges that are being compounded by climate change. If not addressed swiftly and rigorously, climate change and its effects will impact basic things like food and water and networks that our economic activities depend upon. Worst of all is the fact that the most vulnerable among us will be the hardest hit."

Owing to its position as a highly vulnerable sector, the agricultural segment is the first in the province to benefit from a sectoral climate change response framework and plan.

"The SmartAgri Plan presents the 'road map' for the agricultural sector to travel towards a more productive and sustainable future," noted Bredell.