

Giving Development a Face

[Communal Wool Farmers Project]



Infrastructure, equipment and genetically improved livestock are worthless without farmers having the ability to utilise and manage it. ComMark has a crucial role to play in the provision of capacity in terms of training personnel.



- * ComMark is funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)
- * This project is implemented by the National Woolgrowers Association of South Africa (NWGA)

COMMUNAL WOOL FARMERS PROJECT >>



why wool?

WOOL IS A SUSTAINABLE CASH RESOURCE FOR FARMERS, but lack of local knowledge on increasing yields and quality limits production and its benefit as an income generator. The development of small-scale wool production has been the focus of a ComMark-funded initiative by the National Woolgrowers Association of South Africa (NWGA). The overarching objective of this intervention is to increase the income of wool producers in the communal areas of South Africa by developing commercial market arrangements favourable to sustainable wool products and thereby reduce poverty.

Leon de Beer is the managing director of the NWGA. He is passionate about wool farming. But what makes him so engaging is his enthusiasm for the role the NWGA, with assistance from ComMark, plays in the development of rural communities. "30% of a sheep's value is in its wool," he explains. Traditionally, rural communities have seen sheep as a source of meat, to be consumed themselves, or to be sold to other members of the community for weddings, funerals or other gatherings. Leon speaks with horror of communities where wool is burnt because no one knows what to do with it.

"We have to continue with, and build this programme! Wool is low-risk farming, and sheep are already in the communities. Wool production brings outside money into a community – as much as R2,694,987 in the case of the Hewu local municipality in the last shearing cycle (2006/2007).

"That's not money already in the community being recycled, it's new money! And foreign capital because the wool is exported. The figures speak for themselves," says Leon.

Wool can really make a difference in people's lives in the short and medium term. There is such potential, this is a development strategy that really works.

Leon de Beer,
Managing Director: NWGA

what's the problem?

Traditional wool production in the Eastern Cape is characterised by low production yields, poor quality and therefore low prices. The price that farmers will receive for their wool is affected by a number of factors:

- * Low quality sheep producing low quality wool;
- * Low lambing percentage, resulting in low numbers of sheep to shear;
- * Low quality wool as a result of low quality grazing; and
- * Lack of knowledge around management of the production.

small-scale farmers battle with....

- * Communal land tenureship;
- * Insufficient shearing and wool sorting equipment;
- * Lack of knowledge about shearing, sorting, classing, packing and wool contamination;
- * Lack of access to good breeding stock, breeding programmes and effective veld management methods ;
- * Insufficient quantities produced to make up a bale of similar quality wool; and
- * Lack of co-operation between small-scale farmers.

Communal wool farmers are often exploited by hawkers who drive around and offer very low prices to these people who are in desperate need of an income.

[These itinerant traders are known as 'beep beeps'.]

shearing the sheep ...

The Sibanye shearing shed has been built in Godidi village. The rolling hills of communal land are studded with the roving flocks of sheep which graze there. These flocks belong to individual communal farmers and are increasingly providing an income for their owners.

Nomfanelo Quluba is a 62 year-old widow with a household of grandchildren to support. She might well have been disregarded by the community or pitied, but her position as a sheep owner has earned her high status. With a flock of 95 sheep, Gogo Quluba is one of the most respected members of the village. For her, the programme has not only provided an unforeseen income (R4,000 in the last shearing season), but has also afforded her children the opportunity to be trained and to gain skills which they would probably not have received otherwise.

Nomfanelo Quluba, sheep farmer >>



This is a programme which does not discriminate against gender or age.

what did we do?

The Wool Industry Forum identified training and development of communal farmers as a priority to be supported with wool industry funds. The NWGA (with ComMark funding), government and the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) have joined together to focus their efforts on this challenge. The overriding aim of ComMark's intervention is the increase in wool income of participating farmers and communities through the following interventions:

- * Organisation of farmers into producer groups, such as shearing shed committees and woolgrower associations, which are necessary for structure and orderly contact with farmers;
- * Shearer-training courses presented by the NWGA Shearer Training Section;
- * Promoting communal marketing;
- * Linking communities with commercial wool markets;
- * Linking communities with research and new technology;
- * Advising farmers on broader development issues regarding infrastructure and equipment, the genetic improvement of their flocks and correct veld management procedures;
- * Liaising with project partners and role-players with the potential to add value to wool farming communities; and
- * In general, serving as a catalyst for socio-economic development of wool-producing communities.

Staff must be thoroughly trained to become respected specialists to provide efficient, goal-orientated training and a support service to farmers.



The sheep shearing manual used for training is recognised as being one of the best in the world.



the programme as a whole consists of four key interventions ...

- * Genetic improvement of sheep flocks;
- * Improved animal nutrition through improved veld management;

The third and fourth components of the programme are the focus of ComMark's assistance:

- * More effective marketing of wool to overcome the marketing restrictions resulting from the communal land tenure system (small volumes and lack of collective marketing); and
- * Training of shearers and farmers in classing, sorting, shearing and contamination of wool. The training is accredited according to South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) standards.



ComMark training and other interventions have resulted in:

- * A total of 654 shearers being trained between 2004 and 2006.
- * The training programme has also included study tours, lectures and information days – which coincide with the production pattern of wool farming.
- * ComMark has funded chemical analysis of wool fibres from communal farms to assess whether it can be marketed as organic wool.

Competitions

Competitions for wool production and shearing are held as a means of motivating wool growers and shearers.

partnerships

It has been a priority of the NWGA training and development programme to establish partnerships with the following organisations:

- * Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture
- * National Department of Agriculture
- * Local Government
- * Agricultural Research Council
- * Grootfontein Agricultural College
- * Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria
- * Welcome Trust
- * Intervet
- * Parasol
- * Cape Wools South Africa



Communities have benefited from linkages with...

- * The ARC-led breeding project;
- * The Parasol animal health project which is the responsibility of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria; and
- * The ARC, Dohne Development Institute and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research's research project on the impact of veld management and planted pastures on animal reproduction.



what did we find?

One of the most positive aspects of this programme is the support of rural communities which see the benefits of being part of it. It is clear that the potential of sheep farming as a means of developing and uplifting communities is huge.

The NWGA says that significant improvements are still possible in the quality and quantity of communal yields. If the total current communal clip were marketed through the formal system at the average price of the national clip for 2006, the potential income from wool could improve to more than R60-million. Figures for the 2006/2007 shearing season looked very promising. The Hewu local municipality in the Chris Hani District has seen a growth in income from wool production of over 132% on the previous season. Although an increase in the wool price accounted for 43% of such growth, the remaining increase in income was due to better quality and larger yields, which in turn resulted in higher prices.

Prices of communal wool are kept low as a result of contamination, low clean yield, bad classing and underweight bales. These constraints can be rectified with proper management, training and the use of shearing sheds. And it is here that the effect of ComMark's involvement is most keenly felt.

There is a sense of practicality in the management of the programme. While 846 sheds have been built (and their communities organised), it has been accepted that with current capacity it is impossible to attend to all of them. Prioritisation has taken place and the 310 sheds which produce 84% of the total communal clip sold through the formal market have become the focus of the programme.



"NWGA does not need to canvas for members.
Communities approach us to be included in the programme."

Leon de Beer, Managing Director: NWGA



what we have achieved...

- * Farmers have been organised into woolgrower associations or shed communities;
- * Training has been successful in that it has resulted in higher yields and better quality clips;
- * Management and production skills have been developed through a range of projects; and
- * Communities have been linked with commercial wool markets, yields have improved in quantity and quality, and since the programme started, there have been measurable improvements in income gained from wool sales. Some communal sheds even outperformed the national average 8% in the 2005/2006 cycle.



How is this sustainable?

One of the challenges of the project is to lock emerging farmers into the formal market. In 2006, more than 55% of the wool produced by emerging farmers was marketed through the formal auction system – up from 20% in 2002/03. Furthermore, former Ciskei and Transkei farmers are getting higher prices for their wool than ever before. Whereas they used to get only 42% of the average industry price, they are currently getting 46%. This shift into the formal wool market has translated into an estimated annual income increase of R7-million for these farmers, compared to previous levels.

Significant improvements are still possible in the quality and quantity of communal yields. If the total current communal clip were marketed through the formal system at the average price of the national clip for 2006, the potential income from wool could improve to more than R60-million.

It is clear that the potential of sheep farming as a means of developing and uplifting communities is huge. Moreover, as ownership and maintenance responsibilities are carried over to the wool producing communities or shearing shed committees, true buy-in has been realised from participating communal wool farmers.

It is a reality that a single organisation cannot be successful in agricultural development. It therefore remains a priority for the NWGA to establish new and nurture current partnerships to achieve the wool industry's goals in terms of government's Strategic Plan for Agriculture. In addition, as the wool industry is a very important export industry for the country, the South African wool industry fully supports the project, aiming to produce more wool of improved quality.

[We used to have to shear the sheep in our own homes. Now we use the shed. I have learnt about contamination and how bad this is for the price we receive for our wool.]

[Shearing is physically very demanding work. The farmers may be older people, but it's the young who do the shearing.]



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The world championships held in Australia in 2007 were won by a South African shearer.



Main challenges facing the programme:

- * The programme lacks human capacity and extension officers are over-stretched. It is hoped that further personnel can be seconded from the Department of Agriculture.
- * Veld management presents enormous problems for farmers. The communal land tenure system means that flocks cannot be managed effectively. Fencing, camps and grazing are issues which have to be dealt with in a focused manner. District municipalities are being drawn into negotiations to look for ways to manage these situations effectively.
- * Lack of funding means that fewer improved rams can be brought into communal areas than are required. Group breeding schemes within communal areas are being established to help overcome this issue.

Masibambane!....

Mandla Jack is the chairperson of the NWGA programme in Saki Village. He is the owner of 38 sheep and in 2007 added a further 11 lambs to his flock.

Mr Jack stresses that wool provides him with good money once a year at shearing time. Previously he viewed sheep as a source of meat only, but now the added income is welcomed.

One of the main challenges faced by communal farmers is the communal land tenure system. Animals cannot be prevented from mixing, and grazing patterns cannot be managed properly, he explains. As a result, disease transference and over-grazing are constant realities.

Community members in this village are, however, rallying together to solve some of the problems which they all face. Mr Jack is of the opinion that ComMark-funded training is empowering farmers to make informed decisions about veld and herd management.

[When one dips, we all dip. We are in this together!]





staying a part of the programme



Farmers in KwaZulu-Natal who were part of the programme when they were in the Eastern Cape – before the provincial demarcations were changed – have asked for the programme to be extended to include their new province.



what's next?

In the medium term, the NWGA training and development programme will focus on the following priorities:

- ❖ Increasing capacity by seconding graduates from agricultural colleges;
- ❖ Piloting basic finance and management, as well as Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) courses;
- ❖ Focusing on organising for the introduction of improved rams;
- ❖ Introducing the programme to other provinces;
- ❖ Increasing the percentage of communal sheds performing better than the national average; and
- ❖ Increasing the number of group breeding schemes.



The opening of the shearing shed in Saki Village is an opportunity for the whole community to celebrate.

