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More jobs and crops per drop will determine water challenge

It is a global trend to distribute water away from agriculture to industry and for urban use. South Africa will be no exception. With pressure on this limited resource agriculture will find itself at the back of the queue. The agricultural sector will have to come to grips with the process of water allocation. It will have to increasingly participate in the detail management of this process to get their fair share and make sure that the system works for them.

This was the message of Prof Mike Muller of the Graduate School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand at the 2016 Agbiz congress.

Muller said that overall water demand in South Africa is projected to increase by 55% by 2050 due to growing demand from manufacturing (+400%), thermal electricity generation (+140%) and domestic use (+130%). In the face of these competing demands there will be little scope for more water for irrigation in agriculture.

Climate change

Climate change will further put pressure on the demand for water. Muller said that there are different scenarios but it is clear that there will be a lot of uncertainty and variability with regards to climate. As in the rest of the world the South African agricultural sector will have to plan for this uncertainty.

“Predictions for low rainfall and higher temperatures will result in more evaporation and reduced infiltration. Floods and droughts will be more frequent or more intense. More forceful storms may increase river and groundwater flow, and water storage will become more important. It is also fairly sure that the western side of South Africa will become hotter and drier,” Muller said.

“The challenge is proper capacity to manage the use of water. No increase in water for irrigation means that farmers will have to significantly increase production efficiency. If they don’t, the competition for water will be even more severe.”

Water will have to be shared

Muller said that South Africa has specific challenges with regard to water allocation. In future water will have to be shared between more users and it will have to meet development priorities.

He believes that “sustainable intensification” could be the answer to South Africa’s future water problems.

“Globally this means that agriculture will have to produce food and fibre with less impact on the environment. In other words, by intensifying food production while ensuring that its natural resource base is sustained and improved for future generations.”

In a South African context it means that sustainable intensification should also support broader social goals to become “developmental intensification”.

“You will have to include more people in agribusiness and they will have to participate on more equitable terms in value chains. They will have to make more productive use of water and not just land.”

For sustainable intensification to succeed in South Africa water allocation should prioritise jobs and production, Muller believes. Catchment managing agencies will have to lead local management and development strategies. These agencies need to be supported to develop local water strategies.

“You must make a contribution to strengthen these agencies as they provide you with a platform to make your voice heard. You should convince participants and stakeholders that you also care for social issues while focussing on job creation and production.”

National Water Act must be implemented

Muller believes that the National Water Act contains a good policy framework for the management of the country’s water resources, but that the act must now be

implemented. He pointed out that BEE is not the focus of the act, but only one of ten goals.

He believes that globally the water issue for producing food will be resolved through trade and not water management. Food will be produced where it can be produced with the most effective use of water and then traded with less water rich countries. This is already happening and within the Southern African Development Community there are a lot of possibilities for cooperation.

“Virtual water trade” means that people will not look at a shipment of maize in terms of its weight in tonnage, but in terms of how much water was necessary to produce the shipment. Countries will therefore import products that they cannot produce water-efficiently and vice versa.

“Make the water allocation process work for you with strategies that support inclusion. Agricultural success depends less on people, land and water but more on money, management and markets,” Muller concluded.

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