

Media release on behalf of irrigation farmers: 29 December 2022

Collaboration between farmers and Eskom requested to save harvests under irrigation

A group of Northern Cape irrigation farmers released a video directly addressed to Eskom's leaders to tell them that, due to irregular loadshedding, crops under irrigation are at risk in one of the country's poorest provinces, and probably also in other parts of South Africa. Follow the link for more information: <https://youtu.be/8sbqRRb4-UY>

This group of farmers are requesting that Eskom, relevant government departments and farmers work together to implement loadshedding with much more insight to save irrigation harvests. They understand that Eskom is facing specific challenges, but they also believe that they can make practical suggestions on how to successfully navigate the crisis – together.

“We have to proactively warn everyone in South Africa that production under irrigation will not be successful and that people will be retrenched if Eskom does not urgently start to implement loadshedding in a coordinated effort with farmers,” was the message to Eskom where the group of farmers convened in prayer for South Africa shortly before Christmas.

It was only 10:00 in the morning where everyone could already feel the scorching sun in the merciless Northern Cape heat outside Douglas. Irrigation pivots were standing dead still over maize and potato fields where pastor Mark Southey led the prayer. “I know the sun and the ground is hot, but I’m asking you to kneel in prayer with me.”

After the prayer, Mr Jaco Cilliers, an irrigation farmer in the area, said that due to loadshedding they receive 30% to 40% less electricity than usual. Yet their electricity bills have increased by 40% or more. Ruraflex can't be utilised for its intended purpose because pivots must be started when electricity is available, even during more expensive periods. “Lately we have to pump water in peak periods, making our electricity bills skyrocket.”

Pivots use a larger amount of electricity immediately after being started, which currently must happen three to four times a day, as opposed to once or twice a week under normal circumstances. This forced trend has a massive impact on farmers' electricity bills. “Also, we don't know what tomorrow's electricity schedule will look like. That means that we must over-irrigate maize or potatoes even when they are not in need of water, only to compensate for a possible inability to water them later. It's not healthy. We can't schedule irrigation the way we should.”

Certain crops are currently getting only half of the water it needs due to irregular loadshedding. Fertiliser is applied irregularly too because some parts are skipped as the electricity goes off and on.

“For example, when maize is not irrigated correctly, ineffective pollination takes place. This can lead to the loss of half of the yield. The yield is determined by the amount of water given at the right time – a decision that loadshedding has taken away from farmers,” says Cilliers.

He adds that switching pivots on and off frequently, leads to mechanical damage. More irrigation time is lost when repairs must be done. “Many pipelines have burst because of air pockets created by switching the systems on and off.”

Mr Gerhard Bruwer, a fellow irrigation farmer in the area, says that the poor will suffer the most if this problem isn't addressed effectively. “Churches, schools, and communities will suffer.

“If loadshedding does not improve, a dark picture is painted for rural parts of our country. Here, everyone is dependent on agriculture. If the situation does not improve, rural areas will suffer significantly and picking it back up, is near impossible. We can’t do this on our own. We appeal to Eskom to please collaborate with us.”

He also says that large amounts of food are produced under irrigation in South Africa. For example, if maize under irrigation is hit with a one-week drought in the pollination period “you’ll lose half of your yield in one week”.

In the meanwhile, meticulous planning is required from farmers with rivers flooding after high rainfall in catchment areas, leading to flood damage in this region. More irrigation time is lost when pumps must be moved according to changing water levels. “It’s continuous crisis management, making things even more difficult for us,” says Mr Danie Fourie, chair of the local water association.

According to farmers and farmworkers in the area, they are working longer hours and getting less sleep. They are constantly getting wet switching pivots on and off until the early hours of the morning, as currently required of them.

One of the farm workers, Mr Andries Kok, says that they are going through a tough time. They are overworked and exhausted. “But it will get worse if the crops don’t get water,” he says. “The potatoes are rotting in the soil. We ask Eskom to please address this crisis. We are dependent on our jobs and if there aren’t any harvests, we’ll be cut off. What will we do sitting around at home?”

Mr André Prins, crop research manager at GWK, confirms the arising fears about the impact of irregular loadshedding on yields in this area with the maize season that recently started. “Loadshedding, warm summer months and evapotranspiration can cause irrigation shortages. These shortages have a direct negative effect on yields. The ripple effect of bad yields throughout the agricultural community can create enormous pressure on the rural economy,” says Prins.

Mr HF Cilliers, another irrigation farmer in the Douglas area, says that this is a distress call and a warning. The country will be without food if production under irrigation isn’t managed properly. “That is the message that we want to convey to South Africa and Eskom. Please provide useable electricity at the correct times in better increments for us to grow our crops. Our crops are rotting in the fields because we can’t water them properly.”

He asks that Eskom sits down with them to develop a plan for optimal coordination of loadshedding to ensure the best outcome for communities in rural areas. Faster approval of solutions for implementing solar energy on farms is also necessary. “People in the Northern Cape are strong. We can win together with Eskom. Loadshedding once a day for a specific amount of time is one example of a possible solution. Then you can do proper planning for your operations. Our people are agile and adaptable. We need to join forces. Only then will we win with solutions that can possibly be applied in other parts of the country as well.”

Challenges with crops currently under irrigation follow shortly after a wheat harvest from irrigation farms in the area with much lower yields than normal due to, among other things, warmer winter temperatures and incidence of Fusarium infection, with a negative impact of millions of rands.

Between the irrigation pivots outside Douglas in the Northern Cape, where the group of farmers were convened, pastor Southey prayed for the coming harvest, asking that it will be blessed, even with all the challenges: “Speak to the people who need to hear this. Speak to their hearts.”

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