

# CLIMATE CHANGE

## South Africans' support help pull Northern Cape farmers through devastating drought

*While prolonged drought has brought many farmers in the Northern Cape to their knees, concerned citizens have rallied across the country to help where they can. Petro Kotzé visited Kenhardt, one of the worst affected areas.*

Petro Kotzé



*A sheep carcass on a livestock farm in Kenhardt, South Africa.*

After headline grabbing droughts over the past years, near-, to above-normal rainfall fell over most of South Africa again this year. Yet, prolonged drought is still continuing in certain parts of the country.

According to the latest map of the Standardized Precipitation Index (a widely used drought index that can be calculate over different time resolutions) most parts of the Northern Cape is still extremely dry (as well as a significant part of the Eastern Cape).

Here, the ongoing drought has wreaked havoc. Head of disaster management for Agri-SA, Willem Symington, himself a farmer from Kenhardt in the Northern Cape, says that they are well familiar with drought and they have learned to manage it well.

Yet, the unusual conditions of this drought have brought many farmers to their knees. Their plight has rallied South Africans across the country to help.

### **A drought like we've not seen in a long time**

The Northern Cape is the largest province in South Africa. With a landmass of 361,830 km<sup>2</sup> it covers approximately 30% of South Africa. It's also home to the smallest share of the country's population. Only 2.1% or 1.23 million South Africans reside here.

The landscape is mostly desert and semi-arid, allowing only 2% to be used for crop farming mostly along a strip next to the Orange River, where farmers irrigate export grapes. Another 1%

or so is conserved, but by far the bulk of the land (96%) is used for stock farming, including beef cattle, sheep and some goats. Game farming is also popular.

Most farmers here rely on late summer rainfall. As cold fronts pass to the south of South Africa a band of low pressure (troughs) develops over the Northern Cape, moving from west to east, explains Dr Andries Kruger of the South African Weather Service. In ideal conditions these troughs transport moist air from the northern parts of the subcontinent close to the tropics into the province. As this moist air lifts, storms develop and produces rainfall. In the south and far west of the province, the passage of cold fronts allows for winter rainfall.

Under these conditions the average rainfall across the province (for the period 1981 to 2010) is about 226 mm, says Dr Kruger.

Local farmers speak of a seven- or eight-year drought, but Dr Kruger says that since 2013, four years can technically be considered dry, being years during which 75% or less of the average normal rainfall fell. Actually, in 2019, the lowest rainfall in the province since at least 1922 was logged.

The harsh conditions of that year was given added punch by abnormally hot temperatures. Due to the large spatial variability in the climate of the province, it is not possible to determine average temperature, but surface temperatures follow a general pattern of long-term warming, notes Dr Kruger.

In fact, he says, a large part of the province has undergone stronger warming than the rest of South Africa. "We have found that the data from long-term temperature stations in

the province indicate a disproportionate contribution to the above-normal temperature anomalies during the last number of years," says Dr Kruger. Because the Northern Cape covers such a large part of South Africa, the anomalies in temperature here contribute significantly to the overall situation in the country. "In this regard 2019 and 2015 can be considered to be the two hottest years in South Africa since at least 1951, being about 1.1 degrees Celsius above the 1981 to 2010 average," he adds.

Kruger adds that, from a statistical perspective the drought is not only unusual because 2019 is the driest year since 1922. Additionally, only the late forties and early fifties, and the first half of the sixties show a similar scale of grouping of dry years since at least 1921.

On the other hand, "wet" years have been few and far in-between. "If a wet year is considered to be a year with rainfall at least 125% above the normal there has only been four years meeting that criteria for the Northern Cape over the last 20 years, being 2000, 2001, 2006 and 2011," he explains.

The impact on the ground has been devastating.

### Farming through the drought

According to Agri SA's 2019/20 Agriculture Drought Report, more than 15 500 farms covering more than 20 000 000 hectares are severely affected by the prolonged drought in the Northern Cape. The total area affected by the potential disaster drought in the province is well over 27 million ha with a carrying capacity of over a million livestock units.

Petro Kotzé



Farmer, Wynand Bezuidenhout, on his farm just outside Kenhardt, four years into the ongoing extreme drought.

Petro Kotzé



*The SA Water Warriors arrive in Kenhardt.*

Herman Smith has been farming in the Kenhardt area since the nineties. "This is a completely different drought," he says. "It just never rains". The ongoing dry spell could cause the end of his business, as he says he won't be able to continue farming like this for much longer. His sheep have dwindled in number from 300 to 116.

Third generation farmer, Memory Buis, has been farming here for 32 years. Their flock of sheep has been reduced from 360 to 42. "We will not stand up from this again," she says.

Local farmer, Johann Beukes, says that some people are against the ground. He explains that they usually get around R1 200 for an 18 kg lamb but now, the lamb needs R250 of supplementary feed to survive, slashing income substantially. "For cattle, the losses are even bigger," he says. The drought has significantly reduced his numbers of sheep, cattle and horses too.

Symington, also Agri Northern Cape's vice president, says the impact of the drought circles much further than the farmers. Though there is also mining activity in the province, most communities in towns rely on common allowances and livestock farming. "If you take the livestock farming away, the local economy collapses." He says that due to the loss of buying power, this is already happening. "All small businesses are under pressure, because people don't have money to buy stuff anymore." In a province where adult poverty rates were notched at 54.3% even before the drought, the impact is substantial.

According to the mentioned Agricultural Drought Report,

employment in agriculture for the Northern Cape declined with 22.5% (9, 000) on a year-on-year basis. It further states that the direct impact of this current drought and potential escalation if the drought prevails will be "disastrous" to the economy of the Northern Cape Province.

Yet many farmers, at least, simply have to stay put. "We have no plan B," says Symington adding that at his age (55) alternative options are severely limited.

Though government support has been announced, for many, it might be too little, too late. Symington explains that by January 2019, an estimated R800 million in relief funding would have been necessary to feed remaining livestock. This January, the South African government announced that R300 million will be set aside for emergency drought relief in the province, on top of R30 million provided last year.

In the interim, South Africans from across the country have rallied in support of drought affected communities, especially farmers. Commercial, emerging, small-scale and subsistence farmers have received aid from various fundraising projects and donations, according to Agri SA. Many are driven by NGO's like Agri Northern Cape, Agri SA, Gift of the givers, "Save the sheep" and numerous other groups as well as business and individuals. Another is the South African Water Warriors, a group of volunteers that conduct outreaches to deliver donated goods to farming communities worst affected by the drought. Mostly, this takes them to the Northern Cape, says founder Deon Smit. This February, it took them to Kenhardt.



Petro Kotzé



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(This page and the previous page) The SA Water Warriors load donations in Cape Town, ready to be driven to Kenhardt.

## South Africans from across the country have rallied to help

SA Water Warriors member, Tina Connaway, joined one year ago, and her work with the organisation has since taken her on outreaches to Kamieskroon, Oudshoorn, Springbok, Kliprand, Prins Albert and most recently, Kenhardt. For her, the impact of the drought has gotten worse over the past year, "looking at how many farmers have taken their own lives, or have just given up."

Established two years ago, the Water Warriors initially helped vulnerable people during the Cape Town water crisis. Soon after, farmers started contacting them for help, and the requests have not stopped since. "We receive many more than we can handle," says Smit. They try and select those communities where the suffering is greatest, and where help has not been received before. A local contact then compiles a list of the farmers and farm-worker families in need of help.

It takes about six to eight weeks before they have enough donations for an outreach, explains Connaway. "We'll take anything that people give," she says. For Kenhardt, this amounted to a delivery of 37 000 litres of drinking water, nine trucks of feed, a cooler truck of perishable goods and 26 *bakkies* and four trailers of groceries for distribution to 355 families of farmers and farm workers.

Smit stresses that they are not affiliated with any political party, government or membership-based organisation, nor do they

ever accept any funds from farmers for the help and goods they deliver. Everything is paid for by donations, and every single sent of donated funds go to help farmers, he says.

The difference the donations, and volunteers' effort make, is tangible. On their arrival in Kenhardt, the streets were lined with local families waiting to receive them. "You cannot describe the impact this has," says farmer, Nolan Jordaan. Many receiving donations in Kenhardt on the day reported the same, saying that the money they save in groceries, will allow them to buy feed to keep their animals alive for longer. "If I can take care of my animals, I can take care of my people," says Beukes.

Still, Symington says it's not been easy. "We farm in hard country," he says. "But when it comes to donations, and people are good to you, that's when you cannot control your emotions anymore." After taking care of your family, workers, animals and community for decades, and then suddenly have to stand in line for handouts, is difficult, he says. "But we are very thankful."

## What the future holds

According to the SA Weather Service seasonal climate watch from February to June 2020, the dry period is set to continue as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is currently in a borderline weak El Niño state. The forecast indicates that it will most likely remain at the border between the weak El Niño and neutral states for the rest of the summer season and early autumn.

The rainfall forecast for early-autumn (Feb-Mar-Apr) and mid-autumn (Mar-Apr-May) indicates enhanced probabilities of below normal rainfall over most of the country with the exception of the eastern parts during mid-autumn. With regards to temperatures, mostly higher than normal temperatures are expected for the rest of summer and early autumn over most of South Africa with the exception of the far south-western parts.

Over the longer-term, Dr Kruger says that projections of future climate change indicate an expectation of general drying of the Western Cape and the far north-eastern parts of South Africa. "Regarding the Northern Cape we do not see any evidence of significant long-term drying considering the period 1921 to present." Yet, how long the drought will still continue for, is anybody's guess. Kruger says "historical rainfall patterns cannot be used with confidence to predict future rainfall patterns through extrapolation."

For the moment, however unlikely it sounds, many farmers say they are also seeing benefits to the drought. "This has really brought our community together," says Buis, as she sorted donated soap, rusks, flower and soya mince into packages for families.

For Symington, the help that farmers in the Northern Cape has received from private organisations and individuals is unbelievable. "Our country is not in a good place, but it's like South Africans have taken ownership of our agriculture." He says that the donations must already amount to hundreds of millions of Rand. "What is happening here is a bigger story than the World Cup."

Sources:

Department Statistics South Africa (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/>)



Petro Kotzé

Tina Connoway, SA Water Warriors member.



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SA Water Warriors Founder, Deon Smit.