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National Wool Growers Association
Training and technology transfer in communal farming areas

National Wool Growers Association is the leader producer body for the wool industry in South Africa and represents over 9 000 farmers whose primary business is growing wool. According to Elize Pretorius, NWGA Manager Communications, the NWGA is the national voice on behalf of producers, advocating their interests to both the Government and internationally. NWGA represents and supports the industry on issues as diverse as trade, animal welfare, research and development, marketing, accountability of grower funds, the environment and industrial relations.

In the communal areas, production technology is aimed at the development of profitable communal sheep farming systems. This is achieved through practical training in sheep management, wool production and wool marketing. Market access for profitable marketing of wool from the developing areas is a practical problem. Therefore incentives for the establishment of more shearing sheds and associated infrastructure with resultant improvement in classing, packing and market access, remain a high priority. Genetic improvement of communal wool sheep flocks also receives priority attention.

The Genetic Improvement Program is one of the flagship programs of the NWGA in the communal areas of the Eastern Cape and is done in close partnership with the Eastern Cape Department of Agriculture (ECDA).

The ECDA annually avails R4.5 million for the program and the project has already been running for five years.

The program involves the introduction of at least 3 000 quality rams per year to communal wool producers in the Eastern Cape on an exchange basis (one communal ram exchanged for a quality ram). Quality rams are bred on contract in a Group Breeding Scheme involving 12 commercial breeders. Top rams are selected annually by an independent specialist to ensure that only the best rams are included in the program.

More than 15 000 rams have already been introduced through this program so far.

The program is also supported by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) with Resource Management (veld and pastures) as well as the establishment of communal ram breeding schemes at four communities.

Grootfontein ADI is involved with progeny testing to assist with the measurement of the impact of genetic improvement of communal flocks and these results are extremely positive for the program.

Background

The existing programme is mainly in former Ciskei and Transkei and Free State.

The Development Programme consist broadly of three strategies, namely:

1) more efficient wool marketing

this is achieved through the provision of the basic infrastructure and equipment needed to shear, class and pack wool according to industry standards for marketing through the wool auction system.

Training in the necessary skills is part of the package ensuring an immediate positive impact on wool income. Partnerships in this initiative include the Mine Workers Development Agency, East Cape Department of Agriculture, the various municipal councils and others.

2) genetic improvement of communal flocks

this is achieved through a project aiming at the establishment of communal ram breeding schemes and the large-scale introduction of superior rams specifically bred for this purpose. Partnerships in this initiative are the East Cape Department of Agriculture, Grootfontein ADI and commercial wool farmers supplying rams and skills.

3) Sustainable resource utilisation

This is a very complex strategy, expensive and long term in nature with the involvement of the Department of Agriculture and the Range and Forage Institute of the ARC a necessity.

This programme focus on four areas of intervention to increase the profitability of communal wool farming:

- 1) More effective marketing of wool, to overcome the marketing restrictions resulting from the communal land tenure system.
- 2) Genetic improvement of sheep flocks.
- 3) Improved animal nutrition through improved veld management
- 4) Training in aspects of production management and providing marketing support.

More effective marketing of wool

Before intervention, severely contaminated, unclassed wool packed in plastic bags are sold to traders, often at ridiculously low prices. After intervention, wool is shorn, classed and packed according to industry standards for marketing through the auction system. Access to infrastructure such as communal shearing sheds, complete with the required equipment is therefore a priority. These are funded through external development contracts. Ownership and maintenance responsibilities are carried over to the wool producing communities / shearing shed committee's, democratically elected from time to time.

Negotiations for funding of development projects aimed at the provision of infrastructure and shearing shed equipment, is ongoing with:

- East Cape and Free State Departments of Agriculture
- District and local municipal councils
- National Development Agency
- CSIR Wool Beneficiation Project
- Foundation for Farmer Development
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Genetic improvement of communal sheep flocks

After two years of negotiating the funding of a genetic improvement project with various potential funding agencies, the East Cape Department of Agriculture undertook to fund the project. This project commenced in July 2002 and is carried out in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Grootfontein ADI and the ARC Range and Forage Institute.

The project consists of three main strategies, i.e.:

- i) the development of communal ram breeding flocks in selected communities
- ii) The project aims to ultimately establish 16 communal ram breeding flocks where rams for own use and for neighbouring communities will be bred. Procedures include the selection of 200 good quality community ewes, scanning, artificial insemination and mating of these ewes to scientifically selected superior rams. Proper sheep management like feeding and health management also forms part of the project. Measurement of existing genetic potential of communal sheep and monitoring of genetic progress is managed from Grootfontein ADI and the Range and Forage Institute Small Stock Centre.

Breeders participating in various group-breeding schemes in the East Cape were contracted by the NWGA to breed rams according to specific rules for the project. A total of 3 200 rams per year will be distributed in this part of the project where:

- One ram per 40 ewes are supplied
- Rams are swapped for homebred rams on a one-on-one basis. Ownership of rams is thus ensured, while swapped rams are slaughtered and remaining homebred rams castrated.
- Tattooing / branding and transportation of rams in line with the Stock Theft Act (Act 57 / 1959) are adhered to and the opportunity to train farmers accordingly is utilised.

More effective management and sustainable utilisation of communal grazing land

Lack of individual land ownership presents numerous problems for communal wool farmers. The nett effect is severe periodic grazing shortages resulting in low wool production, tender wool and stock

losses (especially young lambs during winter). Continuous overgrazing over many years also resulted in low veld productivity, further decreasing feed supply.

The full potential benefit of the comprehensive Training and Development programme can only be realised if communal sheep are properly fed through improved veld management strategies. Inherent dynamics in communal areas make veld management, fencing and water supply, a very complex issue, while costs for infrastructure to apply conventional grazing systems is extremely high.

In partnership with the Department of Agriculture (Land Care Programme), the Range and Forage Institute and with financial support currently being negotiated with an external funding agency, all aspects of proper veld management systems will be demonstrated / evaluated in eight communities taking part in the ram breeding project. Expected advantages to be demonstrated include:

- Sufficient grazing material throughout the year, with a gradual increase in veld productivity and carrying capacity.
- The benefits of a spring lambing season.
- Acceptable animal husbandry practices.
- Increased wool production per sheep and improved wool quality (clean yield, staple strength, etc.)
- Sheep should grow out better and become bigger

Weaning percentages and income from meat should increase substantially.

Negotiations for funding of communal wool farmer training and support is ongoing and include:

- DFID funding through the ComMark Trust
- PAETA
- Mineworkers Qualifications Authority
- District and Local Municipal Councils
- CSIR Wool Beneficiation project
- East Cape Department of Agriculture
- Free State Department of Agriculture
- ARC Range and Forage Institute

The proven success of the NWGA in Transkei and Ciskei led to the establishment of the Integrated Livestock and Crops Development project, where formal partnerships with the Small Stock Centre, National Department of Agriculture, East Cape Department of Agriculture and the ARC Range and Forage Institute were established.