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FMD VACCINATION BEGINS

First 70,000 doses arrive as Eswatini fights to save a battered beef industry.

HAWANE'S STRAWBERRY BOOM

From ICT to fields: how a 10ha farm is sparking love and agri-tourism.

AGRICULTURE BUDGET JUMPS 33%

E2.2bn allocated, with Mpakeni Dam taking the lion's share.

CATTLE TRACKING GOES HIGH-TECH

Umelusi GPS launches in Eswatini—farmers weigh the pros and cons.

FROM TEACHER TO DAIRY FARMER

How one young farmer is turning litres into livelihoods.

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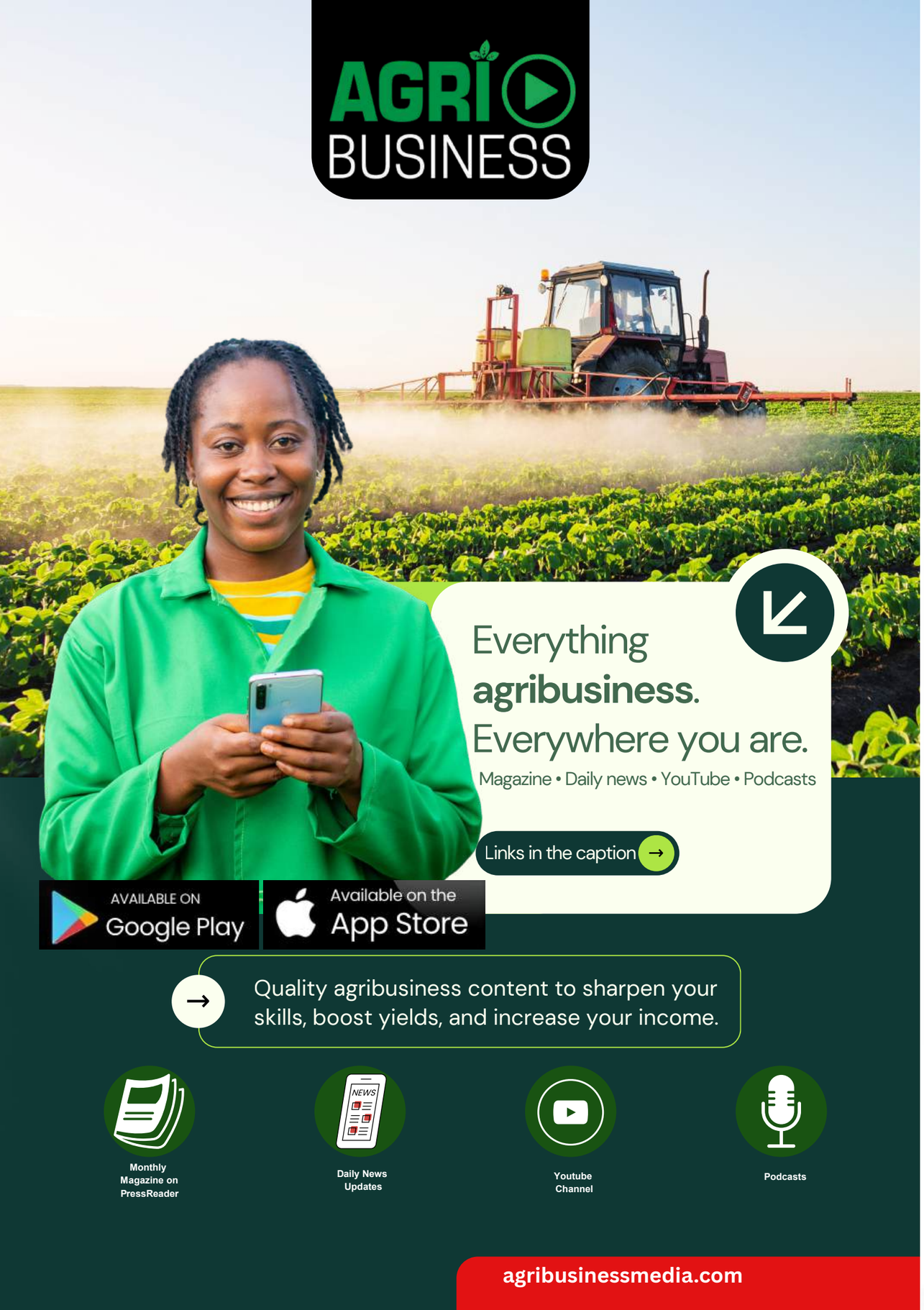

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EDITORIAL TEAM

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Editor's Note

FMD JAB DRIVE TARGETS DECEMBER WIPEOUT

March is a decisive month for agriculture. Heat, water scarcity and market pressure converge, forcing producers to make strategic decisions that shape the entire production year. Farming is not seasonal labour; it is a continuous balance of science, stewardship and enterprise.

This edition of Agribusiness Media reflects that urgency. Livestock producers nationwide are mobilising behind the Foot and Mouth Disease vaccination campaign, with a clear goal: protect herds, restore biosecurity and reopen export markets before year end. Animal health underpins rural livelihoods, employment and national trade.

Water has become a production currency. As rainfall patterns grow erratic and irrigation demand rises, water access and pricing are now boardroom issues. Producers who understand water economics will gain a competitive edge in an increasingly constrained environment.

Technology is no longer optional. From artificial insemination strengthening the beef herd to solar powered cow trackers improving grazing efficiency, innovation is redefining productivity for farms of all sizes. These tools are fast becoming survival mechanisms, not luxuries.

Yet agriculture remains fundamentally human. This issue highlights a Woman Farmer of the Year battling drought and extreme heat, a reminder that resilience is forged daily under pressure. Across the country, producers face climate stress, disease threats, theft and volatile input costs. Diversification offers opportunity. Strawberries in Hawane and mushroom production in Ecinisweni demonstratehowhighvalueenterprises can thrive in small, controlled spaces, opening pathways for youth and women into commercial agriculture.

Markets remain the final judge. The National Maize Corporation's price reduction has eased consumer pressure while raising concerns over producer margins and long term sustainability. A functional value chain must balance affordability with viable production.

Strategic partnerships are emerging as critical infrastructure. The collaboration between KFC Eswatini and Philani Maswati shows how corporate investment can strengthen climate smart production and improve community nutrition.

Skills development, integrated farming systems and value addition remain essential pillars for progress. Beekeeping, dairy expansion and soil regenerative crops illustrate how farms can generate multiple revenue streams while restoring productivity.

March is therefore not a waiting season, but a planning horizon. Vaccination, water security, breeding decisions and market positioning made now will define the year ahead.

Agriculture is not a fallback vocation. It is a frontier industry. Agribusiness Media remains committed to informing, equipping and amplifying producers navigating complex markets and changing climates.

Phesheya Kunene
Editor, Agribusiness Media

DIGITAL KRAAL FIGHTS E6.5 MILLION CATTLE THEFT

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE - EDITOR

The cattle move slowly through the kraal in Sulutane, their hooves lifting soft clouds of dust into the late summer air. A farmer leans against the wooden gate, not scanning the hills for thieves, not counting animals for the third time today. Instead, his eyes stay fixed on a glowing smartphone. In that quiet moment, centuries of livestock tradition meet the digital age. This is Umelusi, a solar powered GPS tracking system turning cattle into live data and giving farmers something many have not felt in years, control.

Innovation born from grief, built for farmers

Bheka Tsabedze does not present himself as a tech guru. He speaks like a man shaped by rural reality. Raised in Bhunya, trained in engineering and electronics at ECOT, he spent years installing CCTV systems before livestock security became his mission.

A personal tragedy changed everything. Unmonitored cattle strayed onto a public road. A fatal accident followed. The loss cut deep and planted a question that refused to leave his mind. Why are farmers still losing animals to theft and accidents in an era of smartphones and satellites? By 2023, that question had become Umelusi. “I wanted a solution that works in a real kraal, not in theory,” he explains, tightening a reflective collar around a calm brown cow. “Farmers needed eyes on their herds at all times.”

How one collar secures a herd

The device is practical by design. A rugged tracker powered by sunlight. A reflective belt visible to motorists at night. A SIM card linking the animal to a mobile phone. Once installed on a lead cow, the system maps the herd’s movement. Farmers set grazing boundaries through geo fencing. If cattle move at unusual hours, an alert sounds instantly. Location data updates in real time, whether the farmer is in the next field or across the border. One unit monitors up to ten cattle. Larger herds require only a few

collars to maintain coverage. Battery life stretches beyond a week even without charging. Monthly data costs remain as low as E25. At E1 850 per unit, farmers compare it to insuring their most valuable asset.

Each farmer controls their own secure profile. Installation happens inside working kraals, dust and all.

A digital answer to a rural emergency

Cattle theft has drained an estimated E6.5 million from Eswatini’s rural economy in recent years. For many households, a stolen cow means lost school fees, cancelled investments or delayed weddings. Livestock farmer Emmanuel Mkhatshwa still carries the weight of losing animals worth over E100 000. Watching the GPS map update, he reflects on the shift. The phone alert gives him a chance to act before the loss happens, not after.

More than security, a management tool

The data tells a bigger story. Movement patterns reveal grazing efficiency. Sudden inactivity can signal illness. Geo fencing supports rotational grazing as the rainy season tapers and pasture planning becomes critical in March. This is precision livestock farming adapted for smallholder realities. Across high risk regions in Africa, GPS tracking has reduced herd losses by up to 15 percent while improving disease monitoring and feed planning. For Eswatini, the technology arrives at a time when climate variability and land pressure demand smarter herd management.

The reflective belts add another layer of value. Night time road accidents involving cattle remain a persistent challenge. Visibility reduces risk for motorists and farmers alike.

From pilot herds to national potential. In recent weeks, installations have expanded across Lubombo and neighbouring communities. Demonstrations at dip tanks and farmer meetings draw crowds eager to see cattle transformed into moving GPS signals. At a modest monitoring station, multiple herds appear on a single screen. Each dot represents an investment protected.

Why this matters now

March is a strategic month in the livestock calendar. As rainfall fades, grazing areas expand and animals roam further in search of pasture. Theft risks rise. Monitoring becomes essential. For farmers preparing for auctions, breeding cycles or protecting lobola cattle, real time tracking offers operational control at a critical time. Widespread adoption could stabilise national herd numbers, strengthen local beef supply and reduce import pressure. Rural incomes become more predictable. Young farmers see livestock as a viable, secure investment.

The new language of the kraal

As dusk settles over Sulutane, the cattle lie quietly and the phone screen continues its silent watch. No torches. No anxious counting. Just steady signals. For generations, protecting livestock meant sleepless nights and patrols under the stars. Today, satellites share that responsibility. The kraal is no longer only a place of tradition. It is becoming a centre of smart agribusiness, where data, security and productivity move together. And the herd is finally connected.

MR TSABEDZE CAN BE REACHED AT: 7612 9003

AGRICULTURE GETS E2.2 BILLION; 73% FOR MPAKENI DAM

BY: SIBUSIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

The agriculture sector has secured a major funding boost in the 2026/27 National Budget, with the Government allocating E2.2 billion to the Ministry of Agriculture a 33 percent increase from the E1.65 billion allocated in the previous financial year.

However, E1.6 billion nearly 73 percent of the total agriculture allocation will go to the construction of the Mpakeni Dam under the Mkhondvo–Ngwavuma Water Augmentation Programme (MNWAP).

Finance Minister Neal Rijkenberg presented the Budget Estimates at the third session of the 12th Parliament in Lobamba, positioning agriculture as a central driver of economic recovery, food security and rural job creation.

Agriculture's Share of the National Budget

Total government expenditure for 2026/27 stands at approximately E35.6 billion. At E2.2 billion, agriculture accounts for about 6.2 percent of total government spending.

While this represents a significant increase from last year, it remains below the 10 percent target set under the African Union's Maputo and Malabo Declarations, which commit member states to allocate at least 10 percent of national budgets to agriculture to drive annual sector growth of 6 percent.

Eswatini has not yet reached that benchmark, but this year's increase narrows the gap and signals stronger fiscal alignment with continental commitments aimed at boosting productivity and food sovereignty.

E1.6 Billion to Mpakeni Dam: The Centrepiece of the Budget

The dominant feature of the agriculture vote is the E1.6 billion allocation to the Mpakeni Dam, now over 44 percent complete.

This makes Mpakeni not only the largest agriculture-linked investment this year, but also the single biggest line item within the Ministry's budget.

Government projects that once fully implemented, the broader MNWAP initiative of which Mpakeni is a flagship component could generate up to 100,000 jobs, largely through expanded irrigation and commercial farming corridors.

To date, more than 1,800 jobs have already been created across dam construction, resettlement works, bush clearing and related agricultural preparation activities. In addition, an apprenticeship initiative is placing 50 young diploma holders at the dam site for hands-on technical training.

The scale of the allocation underscores Government's belief that irrigation expansion is the fastest route to transforming agriculture from rain-fed vulnerability to climate-resilient commercial production.

Livestock Recovery: Disease Control Funding

Outside of Mpakeni, significant funding is directed toward stabilising the livestock industry following the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), which disrupted exports and domestic meat markets.

Government has allocated:

E15 million for rehabilitation of cordon fences to prevent trans-boundary livestock movement.

E57 million for vaccines to support a national vaccination rollout.

Laboratory capacity is also being strengthened to enable faster local detection of pathogens, reducing reliance on external testing and improving response times.

The likely impact is gradual restoration of livestock market confidence and export potential, particularly critical for cattle farmers affected by movement restrictions.

Farmer Finance and Mechanisation

The Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund (EADF) continues to expand access to capital for farmers and agribusinesses. Government reports that over E22 million has already been disbursed to qualifying enterprises.

An additional E10 million has been injected into the Fund in 2026/27 to scale up support for start-ups and expansion projects. Mechanisation partnerships supported under the Fund aim to raise productivity and competitiveness.

Maize Sovereignty and Strategic Grain Reserves

Food security efforts remain anchored by the Hamba Ubuye Revolving Fund under the Commercial Maize Project.

Over four seasons, the programme supported 402 farmers, cultivated 3,141 hectares and produced 7,634 metric tons of maize. For the current season, 248 farmers received inputs worth over E18 million, cultivating 1,861 hectares with expected production of 7,444 metric tons.

Government, through the National Maize Corporation (NMC), has procured maize at E6,000 per ton for ordinary farmers and E6,300 per ton for contracted farmers, reflecting a 3.4 percent increase from the previous year.

Additionally, 50 hectares of Swazi Nation Land has been secured for the construction of a National Grain Reserve facility.

Smallholder and Youth Programmes

The Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Enhancement and Marketing Project (SAPEMP), valued at E851 million over eight years, aims to uplift 19,600 households and create at least 7,500 jobs through climate-smart agriculture and improved market access.

Meanwhile, the Eswatini Youth Employment Opportunities Project (EYEOP), funded at E486 million over five years, targets 30,000 youth aged 18–35 in crop production, livestock and value-addition enterprises.

A Heavy Bet on Irrigation-Led Growth

While agriculture's allocation has increased substantially, the concentration of funding toward Mpakeni Dam means the sector's transformation strategy is heavily anchored on irrigation infrastructure.

At E1.6 billion, the dam consumes nearly three-quarters of the Ministry's total allocation, leaving the remaining E600 million to cover disease control, farmer finance, food security programmes, extension services and administrative costs.

The success of this year's agriculture budget will therefore hinge largely on the speed and effectiveness of irrigation expansion under MNWAP.

A Strategic Step — But Below Malabo Target

At 6.2 percent of total expenditure, agriculture remains below the 10 percent continental benchmark. However, the 33 percent increase signals stronger prioritisation in a sector widely seen as critical to reducing import dependency, generating rural jobs and improving national food resilience.

For farmers, the message is clear: agriculture is back at the centre of fiscal policy —and Mpakeni Dam is the Government's biggest bet on transforming the sector.

ECINISWENI MUSHROOM PROJECT REBOUNDS AS ESWATINI BOOSTS CLIMATE SMART FARMING

By SIKHONA SIBANDZE | JOURNALIST

NHLANGANO – A community mushroom farming project in Ecinisweni is back on its feet after months of disruption caused by theft, an encouraging rebound that mirrors Eswatini's broader push to grow mushrooms as a climate-smart, high-value enterprise.

The Ecinisweni project, run by an estimated 15 small-scale farmers operating from a community centre near at Ecinisweni, had been gaining traction after training support from the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). But production was derailed when a tap connected to the project's storage tank was stolen, causing the entire stored supply to drain out. For mushroom growers, water is not a convenience, it is the system. Without stable water access, farmers could not maintain the cool, moist conditions essential for healthy yields.

Extension Officer at Ecinisweni Sitolwetfu Dlamini, who oversees and monitors the initiative, confirmed that the water system has now been fully restored and that preparations for a fresh production cycle are underway. "The water system has been successfully restored, and the farmers are now ready to restart mushroom production," Dlamini said. "Water is a critical component in mushroom production, and its absence had a direct impact on the previous batch. With the system back in place, the farmers can once again maintain the environmental conditions required for healthy growth, " he added.

For the farmers, the restoration is more than a technical fix, it is a second chance to rebuild confidence, improve operations, and return to the market at a time when demand signals remain strong.

A ready market, still undersupplied

The renewed start at Ecinisweni comes against a market backdrop that continues to favour growers who can supply consistently. NAMBoard's price list for 8–14 February 2026 put oyster mushrooms at E70/kg, yet the same week's formal market listings reflected that supply can be inconsistent. In Manzini market selling lists, oyster mushrooms (500g) appeared as "UNAVAILABLE" a simple but telling indicator that the formal market still experiences gaps.

Research and market observations over time have shown that Eswatini remains a net importer of mushrooms, largely because local volumes and supply consistency are still too low to fully meet domestic demand. While local production is growing through community projects and emerging entrepreneurs, import dependence continues, highlighting why rebuilding local capacity matters.

Why the Ministry is backing mushrooms

As climate pressures intensify erratic rainfall, heat waves, hailstorms, and cold snaps MoA is promoting mushrooms as a practical pathway for farmers to diversify beyond climate-exposed field crops. Unlike most crops, oyster mushrooms can be produced indoors, reducing vulnerability to weather shocks and allowing farmers to manage growth conditions more precisely. This strategy was reinforced at a recent hands-on workshop held at Mahamba Zombodze (Matimatima) Rural Development Area, where farmers were trained on mushroom types, ideal growing conditions, proper structures, fruiting, and harvesting.

MoA Mushroom Development Unit expert Phumaphi Dlamini told farmers that mushrooms stand out because production is possible even when climate conditions outside are unstable if the basics are done right. "Mushroom farming is practical because you can produce indoors even when the weather is unpredictable. But success starts with the basics, especially the substrate and hygiene," she said.

Why oyster mushrooms are the best starting point

While many mushroom types exist, oyster mushrooms are widely regarded as the most practical starting point for small-scale producers. They grow on a wide range of locally available substrates, do not require expensive infrastructure, and can be produced in modified existing structures.

Different oyster varieties also allow farmers flexibility with temperature planning. Common guidance suggests temperature ranges such as about 18–22°C for black oyster and about 20–28°C for grey and white oyster, meaning farmers can plan production around season and housing conditions.

Dlamini emphasised that the fruiting room becomes critical after spawn run and that poor management of this space can reduce yields even when the substrate is good. Starter equipment can be basic: clean water, bleach for hygiene, a mixing surface, chopping tools, sterilising equipment, string or rubber bands, a watering can with a perforated nozzle, containers and a scale for harvesting and sales.

The production flow follows clear stages: substrate selection and mixing, sterilisation/pasteurisation, spawning, incubation, then fruiting triggered by managing humidity, light, and temperature. With good management, harvesting can begin about 3–4 weeks after spawning in many systems.

What the economics can look like

Yields vary depending on strain, substrate quality, hygiene, and management of humidity and ventilation. But practical benchmarks help farmers plan. Using NAMBoard's buying price of E70/kg, a farmer consistently delivering 100 bags × 1.5 kg = 150 kg per cycle and 150 kg × E70/kg = E10,500 gross per cycle (before costs).

The ecinisweni lesson

Dlamini said attention is now shifting from restoration to prevention, with a stronger focus on protecting resources and ensuring sustainability. "Community projects like this play an important role in supporting livelihoods and improving household incomes. Protecting such infrastructure is essential to ensure sustainability and farmer confidence," he said.

As Ecinisweni prepares to re-enter production, the project is expected to contribute again to local market supply and strengthen agribusiness activity in the region. More importantly, it offers a realistic picture of what it takes to build a new value chain. Mushrooms are perishable and quality-sensitive. Shelf life can be short without cooling, and for growers targeting formal buyers, freshness and reliability determine bargaining power.

VACCINATION ROLLOUT BEGINS AS ESWATINI RACES TO SAVE ITS CATTLE ECONOMY

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE - EDITOR

From quarantined dip tanks to shuttered export corridors, Foot and Mouth Disease has tightened its grip on Eswatini's livestock sector, turning cattle into immobilised capital and rural livelihoods into a waiting game.

Eswatini's fight against Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) has shifted from planning to execution. A national vaccination rollout began on 23 February 2026, with veterinary teams moving dip tank by dip tank to protect herds, stabilise rural livelihoods and rebuild market confidence.

Vaccination sessions have been starting from 05:00 (0500hrs), with farmers required to present cattle at designated dip tanks and assist with handling where needed. The drive forms part of the broader response that includes movement controls, surveillance and checkpoints—measures aimed at cutting transmission and keeping disease-free areas protected.

This is no longer only a veterinary emergency. It is a race to prevent further economic freeze in a sector where cattle are both wealth and working capital.

Government has mobilised a E90 million response anchored in mass vaccination, surveillance and enforcement. With vaccine availability now at 120,000 doses following the arrival of an additional 50,000 doses, authorities have strengthened the rollout as they work toward immunising approximately 910,000 cattle.

VACCINATION ROLLOUT: WHERE IT STARTED (FROM 23 FEBRUARY 2026)

The vaccination programme started on 23 February at the following dip tanks:

23 February 2026

Dwaleni, Ncwele, Usuthu, Ngowane, Malunguza, Mphembekati, Madubuya, Tinkhovane

24 February 2026

Dlume, Mozane, Mvuma, Nokwane, Babili, Mphaphati

25 February 2026

Lukhondo A (letichamuka ku Makhonza), Hhabela, Mkhunjini, Maholwane, Logoba, Egcekani, Luhlokohla

26 February 2026

Lukhondo B (Letichamuka eMgubanen maletidla Echibidze), Ndzingeni, Kaphunga, Mvangatini

Early March continuation (02–05 March 2026)

Gabela, Magidza, Dlovunga, Phuhlaphi, Mpolonja, Nhlambeni, Sigombeni; Gwababa, Lamatimbane, Godogodo, Ndlela, Mbanjane, Makhatheni, Mdlebeni; Mahlabane, Ntima B, Mahamba, Spitzkop, Dvumbe, Kholwane, Nyakeni; Fyves, Masakasaka, Zibondeni, Nhlangano, Pienaar, Bhonyongo, Nyakeni.

WHY THIS VACCINATION DRIVE MATTERS

FMD rarely kills adult cattle, but it devastates value. It blocks movement, suppresses auctions, disrupts abattoir throughput and destabilises household cash flow—especially in communal areas where cattle function as a living savings account.

Export shocks have been even more punishing. The loss of premium market access, particularly for fresh beef and related value chains, ripples through transporters, processors, feedlots and butcheries. At ground level, the impact is simpler and harsher: farmers cannot sell when they need to sell.

The vaccination rollout is therefore not only about animal health. It is about unlocking rural liquidity and restoring confidence—locally and in the eyes of trading partners.

THE BIGGER FMD BATTLE: MOVEMENT CONTROL + SURVEILLANCE

Vaccination is a powerful tool, but it cannot work in isolation. Disease control depends on a full chain of discipline: movement permits, cordon enforcement, checkpoint monitoring, and rapid reporting of suspected cases.

Any breakdown—non-compliance, illegal movement, or weak enforcement—creates openings for the virus to circulate and re-seed, prolonging restrictions and delaying recovery.

KING SETS 2026 AGENDA FOR FOOD SECURITY, MARKETS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

BY: SIBUSISO MNGADI | EDITOR IN CHIEF

As Eswatini enters 2026 declared the Year of Agape Love, His Majesty King Mswati III used the Speech from the Throne to call for a renewed national commitment to service, unity, and practical solutions that place the national interest above self-interest.

His Majesty acknowledged that the agriculture sector has made "great strides" over the past four decades. However, he stressed that the country should ideally have achieved food self-sufficiency by now, a reminder that production gains have not yet translated into consistent national food security.

Climate shocks: from emergency response to preparedness

Recent heavy rains were cited as a harsh example of agriculture's vulnerability, with crops damaged by adverse weather. The government, His Majesty said, will continue supporting affected communities while expanding climate resilience and preparedness programmes to protect those most exposed to droughts, floods, and other climate-related risks.

But beyond recovery support, the King challenged the nation to focus on what continues to hold agriculture back from reaching its full potential: markets that convert production into real economic value.

Subsidies will continue, but markets will determine outcomes

The government reaffirmed that it will continue subsidising subsistence farmers "to enhance food security." For agribusiness stakeholders, this points to a two-track priority for 2026: maintain household production support, while accelerating investment across value chains, aggregation, storage, processing, and reliable offtake, so farm output translates into stable incomes, job creation, and broader economic growth.

Fmd: "we have conquered it before" now the call is for lasting solutions

On livestock, His Majesty addressed the Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) setback directly. He noted that the disease is not new to Eswatini and has been defeated before, but its return shows the country "failed to apply the lessons of the past." The priority now, the King said, is to build a lasting solution that prevents recurrence. He further acknowledged that containment measures were not strong enough, as the outbreak spilled beyond affected areas. The response going forward must include stronger education and awareness, and the government was urged to explore additional sources for vaccines to hasten the vaccination effort.

For the beef and dairy value chain, farmers, feed suppliers, auctions, abattoirs, transporters, and exporters, this emphasis is significant. Disease control is not only a veterinary issue; it is a market access strategy and an income protection tool.

Water security: 75% access achieved, 2030 target set

Water was framed as foundational to national prosperity, with the Speech noting progress toward SDG 6: 75% of the population has access to clean water, and the country must maintain momentum until clean water reaches all by 2030. For agriculture, the implications are direct. Irrigation reliability, livestock watering points, and climate adaptation will increasingly depend on how fast water infrastructure and management systems expand, especially as weather

HMK SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

extremes intensify.

Digital transition: why "analogue to digital" matters for agriculture

His Majesty's call for Eswatini to move "completely from analogue to digital" signals a national push for affordable, reliable connectivity and infrastructure that speeds up digital and satellite technology adoption. For agribusiness, the potential payoff is practical and immediate: better market information and price transparency, improved traceability and compliance for premium markets, more accessible digital extension and farmer training, and smarter logistics that move produce efficiently from farm gate to retailer.

The bigger economic picture: investment, jobs and local reinvestment

The Speech urged the nation to diversify and grow productive industries, including a bold target of at least ten companies with minimum E10 billion annual turnover across different sectors to strengthen the economy. Major projects, such as dam construction and industrial development, were presented as part of a wider job-creation and revenue strategy. For agriculture, infrastructure-led growth can be a catalyst if it translates into lower transaction costs, improved roads for produce movement, and investment corridors that attract agro-processing and allied services.

What the 2026 agenda means for farmers and agribusiness

Taken together, the 2026 policy direction signals three urgent priorities for the sector:

Produce more, consistently but with climate resilience built into planning and investment.

Fix the market gap by strengthening value chains that guarantee offtake, reduce post-harvest losses, and grow processing capacity.

Protect market access by treating animal health and biosecurity as economic safeguards, not only veterinary issues.

For farmers, the Speech reinforces a familiar reality: resilience is no longer optional, and food security will not be achieved by production alone. For agribusiness, it sets an expectation that 2026 must be a year of building systems, markets, infrastructure, digital tools, and disease-control mechanisms, that turn agriculture into a stronger engine for incomes, jobs, and national stability.

UNCERTAINTY FOR FARMERS AFTER NMC'S 26% MAIZE PRICE REDUCvTION

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE AND SIKHONA SIBANDZE

While consumers are welcoming the National Maize Corporation's (NMC) 26% maize price reduction, farmers are asking a critical question: what does this mean for producer prices?

With harvest season approaching and input costs still elevated, producers say they need clarity on whether the reduction will eventually affect the price NMC pays them for maize. NMC recently announced that it had reduced its maize selling price from E7,081.00 per tonne to E5,175.00 per tonne, describing the move as a decisive intervention to protect food affordability and stabilise the national grain market. The Corporation said the reduction also applies to packaged maize. The price of a 70kg bag has dropped from E503.20 to E369.80, while a 50kg bag has been reduced from E361.20 to E265.80.

Consumers, especially vulnerable households that rely heavily on staple foods, have welcomed the move. "This will really help us," said Emmelina Dlamini, an elderly grant recipient in Matsapha. "We depend on maize meal every month. When prices go down, even a little, it makes a big difference because our grant must cover food, electricity and other needs."

While households hope the reduction will translate into lower maize meal prices on retail shelves in the coming weeks, farmers say uncertainty remains over whether NMC's buying price will also be adjusted downward. At present, many local maize producers sell to NMC at approximately E6,000 per tonne. With NMC's new selling price now set at E5,175.00 per tonne, questions have emerged about how the pricing structure will be sustained.

ESNAU weighs in

The Eswatini National Agricultural Union (ESNAU) has clarified that, for now, the price reduction announced by NMC applies to the Corporation's selling price to millers and other buyers, not to the buying price offered to farmers. "As far as we know as an organisation, this is a reduction in the price offered by the Corporation to millers and other buyers. There has not yet been any adjustment downwards on the price offered to farmers," said ESNAU Chief Executive Officer Tammy Dlamini.
Dlamini added that the Union would engage further should there be any review of the producer price.

Farmers concerned about margins

Despite this assurance, farmers say clear communication remains essential. "As farmers, we are selling to NMC at around E6,000 per tonne. If NMC is now selling at E5,175.00, we need to understand how that gap is structured," said Thembisile Dlamini, one of NMC's suppliers in Mahlabatsini.
Producers say input costs remain high, with fertiliser, fuel, seed, labour and transport continuing to squeeze production margins. They warn that any downward adjustment in farm-gate prices could significantly affect profitability and influence planting decisions for the next season. Smallholder farmers have also highlighted the importance of predictable pricing, particularly for those servicing agricultural loans or participating in structured grain marketing arrangements.

GRAINS & CROPS

Market stability under watch

Maize remains Eswatini's primary staple crop and a cornerstone of national food security planning. NMC plays a strategic role in procurement, storage and distribution, often intervening to stabilise the market during periods of volatility.
For now, consumers are optimistic that the price reduction will ease pressure on household food budgets. For farmers, however, attention is now turning to the upcoming harvest period, when decisions on buying prices will determine whether maize production remains economically sustainable.

THE BEAN REVOLUTION: RECLAIMING ESWATINI'S SECOND-SEASON GOLDMINE

BY: MCEBO EMMANUEL MNISI

Mcebo Emmanuel Mnisi is an impact-driven Biologist and Agricultural Development Strategist wit over 15 years of experience scaling agribusiness value chains across Eswatini.

The dry bean industry in Eswatini occupies a uniquely strategic, yet often underappreciated, place within the nation's agricultural and economic fabric. As a crop deeply embedded in local culinary traditions, beans are more than just a staple; they are essential to national nutrition and hold the key to rural empowerment.

As we progress through the 2025/26 farming season, the sector stands at a vital crossroads. While the potential for value chain development is immense, Eswatini remains heavily dependent on imports to meet domestic demand. However, with a reported 28% increase in subsidized farmers participating in the current season, the momentum to transform this vulnerability into an opportunity has never been stronger.

The Supply-Demand Chasm

Current data reveal a stark reality: Eswatini produces only a fraction of its consumption needs.

- Annual Production: 1,177 tonnes.
- National Requirement: 7,370 tonnes.
- Annual Shortfall: 6,193 tonnes (Over 80% of consumption).

For the local farmer, this isn't just a deficit; it is a ready-made market waiting to be captured. With the drey bean value chain estimated at million, a staggering E186 million currently E221 leaks out of the country toward imports.

The Economic Case: Why Beans?

To transform this sector, we must shift from subsistence "sweat equity" to professionalized, market-led production. The economic profile of sugar beans makes a compelling case for the modern agribusiness:

Metric	Value (per Hectare)
Market Price	~E27,500 per tonne
Target Yield	1.5 t/ha
Gross Revenue	E41,250
Projected Gross Margin	E17,303

Source: MoA

Seed Systems: The Engine of Transformation

The introduction of improved, climate-resilient varieties is the single most value-adding intervention available. Through the CGIAR Seed Equal Initiative, at least 40 tons of certified seed are now available to replace low-quality, recycled grains.

Recommended High-Performance Varieties:

- DAB 386 & NUA 674: Newly released sugar beans with elite yield potential.
- NUA 45: A biofortified variety rich in zinc and iron for national nutrition.
- Kranskop (Makhuluskobho) & Sugar 131: Highly adapted varieties yielding up to 2,100 kg/ha.

The Post-Planting Phase: Securing the Harvest

In the unforgiving arithmetic of farming, timing is everything. While the January window was critical for land preparation, the February planting window was the time to utilize residual soil moisture from summer rains.

As we move into March, the focus must shift to crop maintenance and aligning with off-takers like the National Maize Corporation (NMC). By adhering to these standards, farmers ensure that every bean planted has a guaranteed home.

The transformation of the bean industry is a national priority for economic inclusion. By integrating technical advice, improved seed systems, and structured market access, we can empower the resilient farmer to reclaim Eswatini's markets. The soil is ready, the seeds are available, and the demand is undeniable. Let us plant and manage with precision.

WHEN DEGREES DON'T MILK COWS – THE SKILLS GAP HAUNTING SADC FARMS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE - EDITOR

CCARDESA Executive Director & Heag of Mission Prof. Cliff Dlamini

Lecture halls are full. Fields are not. Across Southern Africa, farmers are hunting for hands that can fix a pump, vaccinate a herd and run a greenhouse, and they are not finding them.

The pump that wouldn't start

Just after sunrise in Malkerns, the air still cool, a young graduate stands beside a stubborn irrigation pump, flipping through notes on water management. The cabbages behind him droop, thirsty. An older farm supervisor arrives, wipes his hands on a faded overall and, within minutes, the system coughs back to life. Water sprays. The crop is saved.

Two qualifications. One working system

That moment captures the quiet crisis now unfolding across Eswatini and the wider SADC region, a growing army of academically trained graduates and a shrinking pool of practical agricultural technicians. New research led by Prof. Cliff Sibusiso Dlamini of the Centre for Coordination of Agricultural Research and Development for Southern Africa puts a name to it: an inverted skills pyramid. Too much theory at the top, too few skilled hands at the base.

Farms full of paper, short of people

Agriculture still carries the region. It feeds families, fuels exports and anchors rural economies. More than half of SADC's rural population depends on it. Yet behind the statistics lies a daily struggle. Vegetable growers speak of employees who can design irrigation systems on laptops but cannot repair a leaking drip line. Dairy farmers describe graduates who understand feed conversion ratios but hesitate when faced with a sick calf at 2am.

Livestock losses, delayed planting, malfunctioning packhouse equipment, the cost of retraining inexperienced staff is quietly pushing production expenses upward. Consumers feel it in the price of food. The frustration is not aimed at education itself. Farmers want knowledge. They just need it to come with practical competence. There was a time when agricultural colleges produced diploma holders who became the backbone of farms, herd managers, machinery operators, irrigation technicians, greenhouse supervisors.

They were the bridge between research and soil. As many of those programmes faded, so did the pipeline of work-ready professionals. Universities continued to produce graduates, but without strong vocational layers beneath them, the sector lost its operational engine room.
In countries where mid-level training remained strong, technology adoption has moved faster. Precision fertiliser application, protected cropping and digital monitoring systems work best when skilled technicians run them. Without those skills, expensive infrastructure becomes decoration.

Climate pressure, skills shortage

March is a demanding month on the agricultural calendar. Soil moisture begins to drop. Pest patterns shift. Winter crop planning intensifies. At the same time, climate volatility is forcing farmers into tunnels, shade nets and precision irrigation. These are not plug-and-play systems. They require calibration, monitoring and maintenance.

SKILLS & JOBS

A greenhouse without a trained operator is a plastic shell. A solar irrigation system without a technician is a silent investment. This is why the skills gap has moved from being an education debate to a food security concern. There is a human story beneath the technical language. Across rural communities, young people who might have entered agriculture through diplomas and certificates now see fewer entry points. University is not always accessible. Practical training options are limited.

The result is familiar – migration to towns, an ageing farming population and slower adoption of new technology. Reviving vocational pathways would not only solve a labour shortage. It would reopen agriculture as a viable career ladder for rural youth.

Agribusiness leaders are clear. They need researchers and scientists, but they also need artisans. They need people who can read data and people who can fix machinery. It is not a choice between degrees and diplomas. It is about restoring balance in the skills ecosystem.
Technical colleges, farm-based apprenticeships and industry-aligned curricula are emerging as key recommendations. Elevating vocational qualifications to the same status as academic degrees could change perceptions and attract talent back into practical agriculture.

Why this moment matters

The region stands at a crossroads. Climate change is accelerating. Technology is advancing. Demand for food is rising. Without a technically skilled workforce, productivity will stall. Farms will import expertise. Youth unemployment will remain high while opportunities sit unfilled in rural areas. With the right training pipeline, the opposite is possible – efficient farms, empowered young farmers and stronger food systems.

Back where it beginS

As the day warms in Malkerns, the irrigation system runs steadily. Workers move through the fields, checking lines, adjusting valves, monitoring plant health. Agriculture's future will not be secured in lecture halls alone. It will be built in packhouses, dairy units, greenhouses and open fields by people who can turn knowledge into action.

CRANE FEEDS HIGH-QUALITY FEED Vs CHEAPER FEED

BY BHEKI MHLANGA

For over 25 years and beyond, Livestock farmers across Eswatini have relied on Crane Feeds to feed their animals with high quality feed. Some new coming farmers have been misled to think that cheap feed yields higher profit, yet you end up spending more at the end of the batch as the animals takes longer to reach maturity. Below is an easy illustration of the cost-benefit of using high quality feed in broilers.

Broiler Feed costing for High Performance Feed (HP) Vs Low Performance feed (LP) for 100 birds

Noc Of Birds: 100

HP FEEDING PROGRAM COSTS

FEED	FEEDING PERIOD	No Of Days	Feed intake/ bird (Kg)	Total intake (Kg)	Price/Bag (E)	Feed Price/Kg(E)	Feed cost/ batch (E)
STARTER 1	0 -7	7	0.2	20	450.00	9.00	180
STARTER 2	8-14	7	0.6	60	450.00	9.00	540
GROWER	15-25	11	1.2	120	435.00	8.70	1044
FINISHER	26 -35	10	1.4	140	425.00	8.50	1190
TOTAL		35	3.4	340			2 954.00
Downtime		21	Performance Analysis		NB: Cost -Benefit Analysis		
Total cyle period		56	Av Lwt	2.02	Cost of LP Feed		3492.00
No of days per year		365	FCR	1.68	Cost-Benefit of HP Feed/ Cyle		538.00
No of Cycles per year		6.5	Livebility %	98	Cost-Benefit of HP Feed For a year		3 766.00
			PEF	325.75			

NB
1. Less total feed cost per cyle
2. Seven cycles per year and more revenue

Noc Of Birds: 100

LP FEEDING PROGRAM COSTS

FEED	FEEDING PERIOD	No Of Days	Feed intake/ bird (Kg)	Total intake (Kg)	Price/Bag (E)	Feed Price/Kg(E)	Feed cost/ batch (E)
STARTER 1	0	0	0	0	0.00	0.00	0
STARTER 2	0-20	20	1.0	100	410.00	8.20	820
GROWER	21 -35	15	1.0	100	391.00	7.82	782
FINISHER	35-42	7	2.5	250	378.00	7.56	1890
Total		42	4.5	450			3492
Downtime		21	Performance Analysis		NB: Cost -Benefit Analysis		
Total cyle period		63	Av Lwt	2.44	Cost of HP Feed		2954.00
No of days per year		365	FCR	1.88	Cost-Benefit of LP Feed/ Cyle	-	538.00
No of Cycles per year		5.8	Livebility %	93	Cost-Benefit of LP Feed For a year	-	3 766.00
			PEF	283.43			

NB
1. High total feed cost per cycle
2. Six cycles per year and less revenue
3. Only change figures highlighted in yellow to customised the template

It can be concluded that that the cost-benefit of using high quality feed is much higher than when using cheap feed. Less feed is utilised for the batch and one more extra batch for the year is attainable due to having short cycles. The price per bag may look steeper but the benefit is very higher than the cheaper feed that will require more feeding. Farmers must take note that feed constitute +/- 70% of the total production costs. Hence, it the major influential component for profits. Therefore, a wise and well calculated decision must be made in choosing the right feed to use.

Where to Buy Crane Feeds high quality feed in Eswatini

Main stock is available at Farm Services Shop/Crane Feeds (Matsapha)

You can also find Crane Feeds products at trusted stockists including:

Ngwane Poultry (Manzini) - 79722164/ 76959480
Sofique (Manzini & Mbabane) - 79722164/ 76959480
Buycash Hardwares (Nationwide) - 78067604
Kitale Shop & Eagles Nest (Malkerns) - 7678903/76583082
Zanderpeer (Tshaneni) - 76555702
Extrashine - (Nhlangano) - 76437669
Vilakati Farm Services (Nhlangano) - 76331675
Multifeeds (Siphofaneni, Hluthi & Siteki) - 7870056/76031030
Nsoko Trading (Nsoko) - 78340814
Matata Hardware (Big Bend) – 76556755
Eazy Tech (Nkomanzi) – 76233214
Many more other small shops

Get in Touch for Orders and Enquiries
Nathi Dlamini: 76025314
Bheki Mhlanga: 76024376
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Landline: (+268) 2518 4287
Follow Farm Services Eswatini on Facebook for technical support & product updates.

HAWANE STRAWBERRY FARMER EYES EXPANSION, SPARKS AGRI-TOURISM BOOM

PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

In the cool Highveld of Hawane, a strawberry field has become more than a crop. It is now a business hub—supplying supermarkets, creating jobs, and drawing weekend visitors for Eswatini's first pick-your-own strawberry experience.

Happiness Shabangu-Simelane, a farmer with an ICT career, is preparing to expand an enterprise carrying nearly 10,000 strawberry plants on just over 10 hectares, signalling a growing shift toward high-value horticulture and agri-tourism as profitable frontiers for local producers. "I want this place to be a provider of peace and opportunity," she said, guiding visitors through the rows alongside her husband, who works with her in building both the farm and their homestead.

From plots to profit

What began as a modest berry project has matured into a supply chain servicing Pick n Pay and OK Foods, while also meeting demand from restaurants, weddings, local vendors and direct customers. Strawberries take about five months to reach production, with yields of up to 20 berries per plant under optimal conditions, she explained.

Her production system reflects the kind of practical, climate-smart thinking increasingly needed in a tightening weather cycle. The beds are neatly laid out and managed with plastic mulch, a technique that suppresses weeds, conserves moisture, and reduces pest pressure. Plants are spaced for airflow and uniform growth, and soil conditions are maintained to support fruit quality.

Organic inputs from the farm's livestock, particularly rabbit and chicken manure, are used to feed soil fertility, carefully applied to avoid burning the plants. For pest pressure, she uses a simple low-cost mix of bicarbonate and vinegar as part of routine management. Irrigation is done with a sprinkler system twice daily to stabilise moisture levels, though she says prolonged rainfall is still the biggest threat. "Too much rain causes rot, especially in shaded areas, which is why protected production is the future," she said.

The pick-your-own economy

In May last year, Shabangu-Simelane diversified beyond retail supply, launching Eswatini's first strawberry pick-your-own experience, supported technically by the Taiwan Technical Mission. The innovation has turned her farm into a destination, attracting families, youth groups and visitors from neighbouring countries.

Customers arrive with baskets, harvest fresh berries, and pay per punnet, an approach that improves farm-gate returns while building a stronger connection between consumers and food production. She is now planning to formalise the operation further by introducing entrance fees and developing visitor infrastructure including changing rooms, offices and ablution facilities. To reduce waste and capture more value, berries are also processed into juice and jam, extending shelf life and creating an outlet for lower-grade fruit that may not meet fresh market standards.

Cooperative power and market demand

Shabangu is part of the Hawane Multipurpose Cooperative, a collective of about 40 members, where farmers share learning, market coordination and production insights while maintaining their own growing space. Cooperative models are increasingly viewed as a practical pathway for smallholders to strengthen bargaining power and scale access into formal retail supply chains.

Her participation in the Ezulwini Farmers Market last year ended in a sell-out within hours, highlighting strong demand for locally produced strawberries and the opportunity to reduce import dependence through consistent supply and quality.

Data, digital and diversification

Balancing her ICT career with farming, she also markets directly through TikTok, Facebook and Instagram, using short videos and consistent updates to build a loyal customer base. For many emerging farmers, social media is becoming the cheapest route to visibility, bridging the gap between production and markets without heavy advertising costs.

Beyond strawberries, the farm runs a mixed enterprise model: rabbits, broilers, Makhaya chickens, maize and beans. The diversification cushions income, spreads risk, and supports nutrient recycling through manure, closing loops that lower input costs over time. Rabbit production, she noted, offers fast turnover, with some does producing up to 13 kits per litter, while indigenous poultry provides both quick sales and organic fertiliser.

Lessons for growers

Her journey offers a clear message for farmers who want to move from survival production to sustainable profit: diversify your enterprises to stabilise cash flow, invest in mulching and irrigation to manage climate risk, add value through processing and agri-tourism, use digital platforms to build markets directly, and start small tracking results carefully, before scaling gradually.

Strawberries and the future

Shabangu-Simelane's operation is supported through the Taiwan-led Emerging Fruit Tree Production, Marketing and Capacity Building Project, one of several initiatives helping local farmers explore higher-value crops, strengthen skills, and build stronger market pathways. With expansion plans now underway, more plants, improved visitor facilities, and increased retail supply, her Hawane fields are fast becoming a case study in what is possible when innovation meets discipline and market focus.

FAIR IRRIGATION WATER PRICING FOR A SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL FUTURE

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

Water has always been central to Eswatini's agricultural success. From expansive sugarcane estates to emerging commercial farms, irrigation sustains productivity, livelihoods and export earnings. Yet as demand intensifies and climate pressures mount, the question of how water is priced and who pays for its management has moved to the forefront of national policy.

Government is now advancing a reform that could reshape the economics of water use in agriculture. Through a proposed Differential Water Pricing Framework, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Energy is seeking to replace the longstanding flat-rate tariff system with a model that links charges directly to the scale and volume of abstraction.

The reform was unpacked during stakeholder workshops convened by the Department of Water Affairs in partnership with the Joint River Basin Authorities–Project Board. Sessions held at the George Hotel and the Piggs Peak Hotel brought together key agricultural players and water institutions to examine the implications of the shift.

Among those participating were representatives from Royal Eswatini Sugar, the Eswatini Cane Growers Association, River Basin Authorities and the Global Water Partnership. Their presence signalled both the scale of the proposed change and the importance of consultation in navigating it.

From Flat Rates to Fairness

At the core of the reform lies a simple but consequential principle: users should contribute in proportion to how much water they abstract and the scale at which they operate. Under the current flat-rate structure, farms with significantly different abstraction levels may face similar charges. Officials argue that this approach no longer reflects the real costs of maintaining water infrastructure, monitoring river basins or strengthening compliance systems.

The proposed framework introduces a tiered tariff structure based on farm size. Smaller commercial operations cultivating up to 250 hectares would pay one cent per cubic metre of water used. Medium-scale growers operating between 251 and 1,000 hectares would pay one-and-a-half cents per cubic metre, while large-scale farms exceeding 1,000 hectares would pay two cents per cubic metre.

When translated into annual costs, the figures remain modest per hectare but scale with usage. Crops requiring approximately 8,000 cubic metres per hectare would attract annual charges ranging from E80 for smaller producers to E160 for the largest operations. In the case of sugarcane one of the country's most water-intensive crops annual payments would be higher due to average usage of about 13,650 cubic metres per hectare.
The intention is not to penalise growth, but to introduce proportionality. Larger and more water-intensive operations, which place greater demand on shared water systems, would shoulder a correspondingly larger share of management costs.

Financing Water Governance

Revenue generated under the new model is projected to reach approximately E15.5 million annually, contributing toward a national water management system estimated at E18.9 million per year. The bulk of these funds would support operational water management institutions, including hydrological monitoring, infrastructure maintenance and compliance enforcement. A smaller portion would be directed toward system upgrades and feasibility studies aimed at modernising data management. Acting Principal Secretary Sicelo Nxumalo described water as both a lifeline and an economic engine. Agriculture, industry and energy production all depend on reliable supply. Ensuring that the institutions responsible for managing rivers, permits and abstraction remain financially viable, he noted, is essential to national development.

Officials have been careful to emphasise that the reform is not designed to undermine agricultural competitiveness. Instead, it seeks to strengthen institutional sustainability while promoting responsible resource use. By aligning tariffs with abstraction levels, government hopes to embed efficiency and accountability into the system.

Metering and Accountability

Central to the success of usage-based pricing is accurate measurement. Without reliable metering, proportional tariffs cannot function effectively. Authorities confirmed that expanding metering coverage is a priority, with programmes underway to ensure that every commercial abstractor is eventually equipped with a functioning meter.

This shift is accompanied by broader institutional reforms, including the transition from analog record-keeping to a digital permit management system capable of tracking individual users and abstraction volumes more precisely. Such changes aim to improve transparency and reduce disputes over billing.

Stakeholders at the workshops raised pointed questions about enforcement mechanisms and regulatory oversight, particularly under the framework of the Water Act. Participants sought clarity on how compliance would be monitored and how abstraction permits would incorporate stricter metering requirements. These exchanges underscored that pricing reform cannot be separated from governance reform; credible oversight will determine public confidence in the system.

A Phased Transition

Recognising the sensitivity of introducing new charges, authorities have proposed a gradual rollout over five years. Full cost recovery in the first year is considered unrealistic. A phased approach is expected to allow farmers time to adapt while enabling institutions to strengthen technical and administrative capacity.

This measured transition reflects awareness of agriculture's central role in employment and export revenue. Sugar production alone accounts for a substantial share of water abstraction and remains a pillar of rural livelihoods. Any change to input costs therefore carries implications beyond individual farms.

Toward Sustainable Stewardship

Beyond the technical details of tariffs and cubic metres lies a broader shift in philosophy. The Differential Water Pricing Framework signals a move toward valuing water not only as a natural endowment but as a managed resource requiring investment, oversight and shared responsibility.

Officials have committed to continued consultation before the framework is finalised and submitted to the National Water Authority for consideration and legal integration. Stakeholder input from the Manzini and Piggs Peak engagements will inform refinements aimed at ensuring the model is economically practical, socially balanced and institutionally sustainable.
As Eswatini confronts growing pressure on its rivers and aquifers, the debate over pricing is ultimately a debate about stewardship. Linking tariffs to usage is not merely a fiscal adjustment; it is an attempt to align economic incentives with environmental realities. In doing so, government hopes to secure water resources for present needs while safeguarding them for generations to come.

If implemented effectively, the reform could mark a defining moment in the evolution of water governance in Eswatini one that recognises that sustainability begins not only with conservation, but with how society chooses to value what it uses.

MODERN BROILER HOUSE SIDE CURTAIN INSTALLATION: ENGINEERING PRINCIPLES, SCIENTIFIC RATIONALE, AND PRODUCTIVITY GAINS

BY MNCEDISI SIMELANE

The success of any broiler production enterprise is largely determined by how effectively the production environment is controlled. Among the many structural and management components of a poultry house, the design and installation of side curtains remain one of the most critical determinants of ventilation efficiency, temperature regulation, bird comfort, feed efficiency, and overall flock performance. Over time, poultry housing design has evolved significantly, driven by advances in engineering principles, poultry physiology, animal welfare science, and economic considerations in intensive livestock production.

One of the most important advancements in modern broiler housing is the shift from the old primitive system of fixing curtains at the top of the sidewall to the modern bottom-fixed curtain system. This contemporary method has proven to provide superior environmental control, improved feed conversion ratios, enhanced bird growth, reduced mortality, and overall improved profitability. The change is not merely structural but is grounded in scientific understanding of airflow dynamics, thermodynamics, and poultry physiological requirements.

The following discussion provides a comprehensive explanation of modern broiler curtain installation, supported by scientific principles and practical production insights.

The Evolution of Side Curtain Technology in Broiler Housing

Historically, naturally ventilated broiler houses were constructed with side curtains fixed at the top and opened upward. This system was widely adopted because it was simple to construct and resembled domestic curtain systems familiar to most farmers. However, as poultry genetics improved and broilers became faster-growing and more sensitive to environmental stress, the limitations of this system became apparent.

- Modern broiler production demands:
- Precise temperature regulation
- Controlled airflow patterns
- Efficient removal of ammonia and moisture
- Prevention of cold drafts
- Uniform air distribution across the house

These requirements exposed the inefficiency of the traditional top-fixed curtain design. Consequently, bottom-fixed curtain systems emerged as a more advanced engineering solution capable of delivering the environmental precision required by modern poultry production.

Understanding Airflow Physics and Ventilation

To appreciate why modern curtains are fixed at the bottom, it is essential to understand basic airflow physics.
Scientifically, warm air is lighter than cold air and naturally rises upward. Inside a broiler house, metabolic heat generated by birds, heating systems, and equipment causes warm air to accumulate near the roof. This warm air layer often contains moisture, dust particles, ammonia gas, and carbon dioxide.
Modern ventilation systems utilize displacement ventilation. In this approach:

- Warm contaminated air exits through upper openings.
- Fresh air gradually replaces it from above.

This process ensures continuous air renewal without chilling the birds, making it far superior to uncontrolled airflow systems.

The Modern Curtain Fixing System

In contemporary broiler house construction, curtains are fixed securely at the bottom edge of the sidewall and roll downward when opened. The operation resembles how car windows open: the top portion opens first, allowing warm air to escape while fresh air enters gently.

This design ensures:

- Better airflow control
- Reduced cold drafts at bird level
- Improved internal climate stability

The car-window analogy is particularly useful in training farmers. When a vehicle window is slightly opened from the top, hot air escapes first while fresh air enters gradually without causing discomfort. The same principle applies to poultry housing.

Scientific Advantages of Bottom-Fixed Curtain Systems

Efficient Ammonia Removal

Ammonia accumulation is a major concern in broiler production. Concentrations above 20 ppm can cause:

- Eye irritation
- Respiratory tract damage
- Reduced feed intake
- Poor weight gain
- Increased disease susceptibility

With bottom-fixed curtains, ammonia-laden warm air escapes easily through the upper ventilation gap, significantly improving air quality.

Temperature Stability

Cold stress is one of the most expensive problems in poultry production. When birds are chilled:

- Feed intake increases to maintain body temperature
- Energy is diverted from growth
- Feed conversion ratio worsens
- Growth slows
- Mortality risk increases

Bottom-fixed curtains prevent direct cold drafts, allowing incoming air to mix with warm air before reaching bird level.

Problems with Old Curtain Systems

The traditional top-fixed curtain system allows cold air to enter directly at bird level when opened. This leads to:

- Chilling stress
- Increased feed consumption
- Higher heating costs
- Uneven flock growth
- Increased respiratory infections

In severe cases, birds may stop feeding entirely, resulting in immune suppression and increased mortality.

Air Exchange Mechanism

Modern curtain systems rely heavily on the stack effect, whereby:

- Warm air rises and exits
- Fresh air enters gradually
- Continuous oxygen supply is maintained

Farmers can adjust curtain openings according to:

- Bird age
- External weather conditions
- Ventilation requirements

This flexibility improves chick brooding conditions and ensures uniform flock development.

Technical Installation Guidelines

Curtain materials should be:

- UV resistant
- Waterproof
- Tear resistant
- Easy to clean
- Durable under harsh climatic conditions

Recommended materials include heavy-duty PVC curtains and reinforced polyethylene sheets.
Curtains should cover approximately 70–80% of the sidewall height while allowing adjustable upper ventilation.

Modern systems often use:

- Gear-driven winches
- Pulley systems
- Motorized curtain controls

For rural farmers, simpler systems can include:

- Fixed adjustment points at 15–30 cm intervals using wood nails.
- Marked positions for consistent and aligned adjustment
- Curtain edge sealing to prevent drafts
- Zigzag securing ropes to prevent wind damage and wind drafts

Broiler Physiology Considerations

Modern broilers have:

- High metabolic rates
- Rapid growth potential
- High oxygen demand

Poor ventilation leads to oxygen deprivation, reduced growth, and increased stress susceptibility. Bottom-fixed curtain systems help maintain optimal oxygen levels and temperature stability.

Economic Impact

Proper curtain installation has significant economic benefits:

Improved Feed Efficiency

- Better digestion
- Lower FCR
- Reduced feed wastage

Reduced Mortality

- Lower disease pressure
- Improved respiratory health

Enhanced Uniformity

- Even growth rates
- Better processing efficiency
- Higher market value

Conclusion

The transition from top-fixed to bottom-fixed broiler house curtain systems represent a major advancement in poultry housing engineering. The old primitive practice is now largely obsolete, replaced by scientifically designed systems that enhance ventilation, bird comfort, feed efficiency, and profitability.

By allowing warm contaminated air to escape while fresh air enters gradually, modern curtain systems prevent chilling, reduce disease risks, and maximize the genetic potential of modern broilers. For any serious broiler enterprise, whether small-scale or commercial, proper curtain installation should be considered a fundamental investment in production efficiency, animal welfare, and long-term profitability.

For more information feel free to contact me at: 078 981 9180 or 76053030

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Tel: 084 025 8865
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Email: info@aneku.co.za
https://www.aneku.co.za

KFC BOOSTS MLIBA GREENHOUSES TO FEED ELDERLY AND GROW FARM BUSINESS

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE - EDITOR

The sun spills gold across rows of gleaming plastic tunnels at Mliba, painting young spinach and cabbage like a promise taking root. Inside the Philani Maswati Charity Centre, elderly residents watch from a shaded veranda, waiting for lunch that will, for the first time in months, come straight from the farm's own soil.

A few weeks back, this scene would have been impossible. Torn netting whipped in the wind. Empty beds baked under the sun. The feeding programme teetered on hand-to-mouth donations. Hope, fragile and seasonal, had faded. Now, the tunnels stand proud, alive, humming with growth.

From storm to sprout

For two growing seasons, violent storms and searing heat flattened Philani's three greenhouses, wiping out crops and income in a single sweep. Plates went bare. Seedlings stalled. A farm that once sustained more than 30 elderly residents became a patch of waiting ground.

Chairman Lutfo Dlamini walks the new structures, fingertips brushing steel frames as if checking the miracle is real.
"These tunnels are our food basket and our business engine. When they collapsed, everything stopped. Now we're rebuilding for the market, not just survival," he beams.

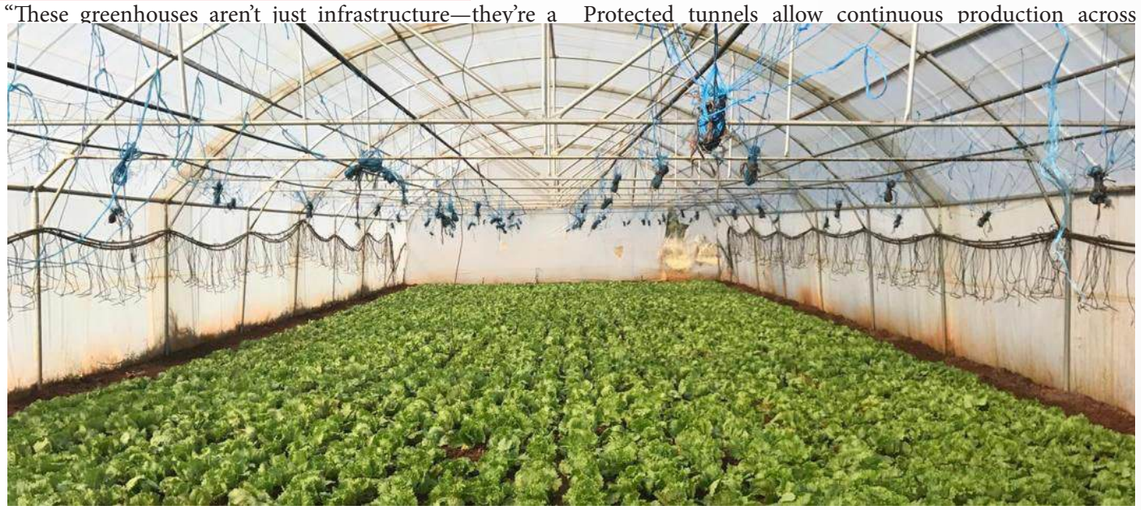
This month's E140 000 rehabilitation completes a bigger E540 000 partnership with KFC, which previously funded solar-powered irrigation, a functioning dam, and water security. For a small charity farm, the combination is transformative. Water flows. Crops grow. Income returns.

Plates, paychecks, and purpose

At Philani, farming is about more than yield. It's about dignity.
Each harvest feeds the elderly first. Surplus reaches community markets. Seedlings travel to nearby growers preparing for late summer planting. Plans are already in motion to reach formal retail shelves, including Pick n Pay, ahead of winter demand.

Inside the tunnels, high-value vegetables thrive under protection from hail, heat, and dry spells. Agricultural extension officers confirm: controlled cultivation can triple yields and slash water use—a vital advantage as March signals the shift from peak rains to tighter moisture management.

Belinda Forbes, KFC's corporate social investment lead, frames it in simple terms:



"These greenhouses aren't just infrastructure—they're a nutrition pipeline and a revenue stream. Philani has shown discipline, accountability, and growth, and that's why we reinvested."

Climate-smart farming is no longer optional
Across Eswatini, open-field farming is becoming increasingly risky. Erratic rainfall, sudden hailstorms, and scorching heat are pushing smallholders toward shade nets, tunnels, and precision irrigation.

Mliba is a microcosm of a national trend: climate-smart infrastructure is survival, not luxury. For agribusiness planners, Philani offers a blueprint—integrated water systems, protected cultivation, a nursery enterprise, and a built-in market through community feeding programmes. A closed-loop model where social impact meets commercial viability.

Business with a human heartbeat

Late morning, volunteers harvest leafy greens. Inside the kitchen, pots begin to simmer. Outside, a young farmer collects seedling trays for his own plot. Three livelihoods, one value chain.

Dlamini's ambition stretches beyond charity. He speaks of contracts, bulk buyers, and steady cash flow that can sustain operations year-round."The elderly must eat first, but the farm must pay for itself. That's how we protect this programme long-term," he explains.

\Why March matters

March is a turning point in the production calendar. Soil moisture declines. Pest pressure shifts. Farmers plan winter crops and manage water carefully.

Protected tunnels allow continuous production across seasons, giving Philani a market advantage when open-field supply drops. It also positions the centre as a training hub for young farmers exploring climate-smart methods.

What's next

The next phase focuses on scaling output and securing retail contracts before mid-year. Nursery expansion will support local growers preparing for winter planting. Data-driven irrigation scheduling will optimise water use as rainfall patterns tighten.

Corporate partners are watching closely, viewing Philani as a model for community-based agribusiness that blends nutrition, resilience, and entrepreneurship.

Harvesting hope

As lunchtime arrives, plates fill with vegetables harvested just meters away. Laughter returns. Conversations flow.

The tunnels do more than protect crops—they safeguard routine, dignity, and economic possibility.

In a season of climate uncertainty, Philani Maswati proves that small plots can become powerful engines of food security and rural enterprise. Greenhouses rise. Seedlings grow. Plates stay full. And at Mliba, the future is farmed under cover.

VELVET BEAN BOOM

BY SIKHONA SIBANDZE

How a caffeine-free crop is brewing exports, jobs and hope from rural Eswatini

The smell hits first. Warm, toasty, slightly nutty. Not the sharp kick of imported coffee, but something softer, earthier, proudly local. In a modest homestead in Mankayane, steam curls into the morning air as Zet Dlamini lifts a roasting pan and smiles like a man who knows he is onto something big.

This is velvet bean coffee. Grown in Eswatini soil. Packed by hand. Sipped in Canada.
And if Dlamini has his way, this humble legume will become one of the country's most unlikely agribusiness success stories.

From backyard to borders

Earlier this year, another shipment quietly left the country, joining small but symbolic consignments already delivered to South Africa and Israel. In total, about 100 kilograms move across borders every five months.
It is not mass production. It is momentum.
Dlamini does not talk in policy jargon. He talks in packaging costs, delayed payments and the price of labels. He points to neatly stacked bags waiting for buyers and shrugs with the calm confidence of someone playing the long game.

"The quality is there. The market is coming," he says, sealing another pouch.

This journey began more than two decades ago in Matsapha. When formal employment ended, the roasting did not. It simply moved home. Today, land has been secured for a dedicated processing site, a clear sign that this is no hobby. It is a business in transition.
Industrial dream. Manual hustle.

The crop farmers are starting to notice

Walk through velvet bean fields and you see why agronomists are excited. The plant enriches soil, feeds livestock and produces between 1.5 and 3 tonnes per hectare under good conditions. For farmers planning their March planting strategy, that is a serious return from a climate-smart crop.

Then there is the bonus. When processed, the bean becomes a smooth, caffeine-free beverage that appeals to health-conscious consumers.

Global demand for plant-based, functional foods is rising. Velvet bean fits that trend perfectly.

Yet on local shelves, imported coffee still dominates.

A meeting of minds, and markets

In recent weeks, farmers, researchers, financiers and entrepreneurs gathered for a high-energy stakeholder session hosted by the Organisation for Women in International Trade alongside Dlanimphilo Multi-Purpose Cooperative. The mission was clear. Build a closed value chain from seed to export.
Inside the venue, discussions drilled into certified seed, lab testing, traceability and digital payments. Outside, Dlamini poured hot samples into paper cups and watched reactions unfold in real time.

Some visitors nodded politely. Others asked where they could buy. A few started talking distribution.

That is how industries begin. Not with speeches, but with conversations over a cup.
Senior extension officer Nonhlanhla Mkhwanazi stressed that export credibility starts in the soil. Seed quality, she explained, determines whether a product reaches international shelves or stalls at the border.

OWIT president Dududzile

Nhlengetfwa shifted the narrative around cooperatives. This is not about meetings and minutes. It is about aggregation, volume and bargaining power. Individually, farmers sell kilograms. Together, they sell tonnes.

For young agripreneurs in the room, the penny dropped.

The human grind behind the growth

Behind every export bag is a family effort. Children helping with branding. Neighbours assisting with roasting. Late nights calculating whether a new label design will attract buyers.
The storeroom tells the story best. Rows of finished product. Ready for pharmacies, ready for bulk buyers, ready for export. Waiting for consistent orders.

This is the reality of emerging agro-processing. Production is possible. Markets take time.

But there is pride in every packet.
Because each one challenges a simple economic truth. Eswatini imports most of its coffee while a local alternative with export potential sits within its borders.

Why March matters

March is a decision month on the farming calendar. Fields are prepared. Crop choices are finalised. Inputs are budgeted. For farmers looking to diversify income and improve soil health, velvet bean offers a triple win: agronomic benefits, livestock feed value and processing potential.

Add the cooperative model and the equation changes completely. Aggregated volumes unlock bigger contracts. Standardised quality attracts premium buyers. Rural processing creates jobs where they are needed most.
This is how value chains grow from the ground up.

Brewing the future

Back in Mankayane, the afternoon sun dips behind the hills as Dlamini checks moisture levels on a cooling batch. The planned processing facility is moving closer to reality. Cooperative structures are forming. Conversations with distributors are gaining pace.

The vision is clear. Scale production. Upgrade packaging to retail standard. Secure regular export contracts. Bring more farmers into the supply network.

Small numbers today. Serious industry tomorrow.

If momentum holds, velvet bean could shift from an underused legume to a flagship crop for climate-smart agribusiness in Eswatini. Less import dependence. More rural jobs. New opportunities for young farmers.

The kettle whistles again. Another batch is ready.

And in that warm, nutty aroma lies a quiet revolution, brewed one bean at a time.

ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION AND THE FUTURE OF ESWATINI'S BEEF EXPORTS

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

MANZINI - Eswatini's beef industry stands at a strategic crossroads. With preferential access to the European Union under the Economic Partnership Agreement, the country enjoys entry into one of the world's most lucrative and tightly regulated meat markets. Yet while the door to Europe remains open, production constraints at home have limited the industry's ability to fully capitalise on that opportunity.

In recent years, Eswatini has exported between 1,000 and 1,200 metric tonnes of beef annually, primarily to the EU under duty-free quota arrangements. The European market offers premium prices, but it also demands consistency, traceability and strict quality standards. Meeting those expectations requires not only strong veterinary systems and compliance frameworks, but also improvements at the very foundation of cattle production: genetics and breeding.

It is within this context that artificial insemination is emerging as a powerful catalyst for change.

Unlocking Genetic Potential

Limited access to improved genetics, high breeding costs and inconsistent herd performance have long constrained productivity in Eswatini's beef sector. For many farmers, especially those operating on Swazi Nation Land, maintaining quality breeding bulls is both expensive and risky. Feeding costs, disease exposure, injuries and uncertain genetic outcomes all weigh heavily on profitability.

Artificial insemination (AI) offers an alternative model one that reduces reliance on physical bulls while opening access to carefully selected, high-performance genetics.

By improving conception rates and herd quality over time, AI is being positioned as a strategic tool to strengthen the national herd and increase overall beef output.

Recognising its potential, stakeholders convened a practical AI training on 12 February 2026 at the Mpisi Veterinary and Farmers Training Centre. The initiative, supported by the European Union and implemented by the International Trade Centre in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, brought together 25 frontline livestock extension officers and veterinary professionals for hands-on instruction.

Rather than focusing solely on theory, the training emphasised practical skills equipping extension officers with the competence needed to deliver AI services directly to farmers across the country.

"This training was a huge boost for me," said Menzi Jele, a Livestock Extension Officer who participated in the programme. "Being trained in artificial insemination gives us practical tools to support farmers better. It helps reduce breeding costs and improve the quality of the national herd."

Efficiency at Scale

The economic logic behind AI is compelling. A single bull can only service a limited number of cows within a specific timeframe. In contrast, artificial insemination allows superior genetics to be distributed across a far wider population, significantly accelerating herd improvement.

Cynthia Dlamini, another participant in the refresher training, underscored the scalability of the technology.

"One bull cannot inseminate many cows in a day, but with AI, the scale is completely different," she noted.

Beyond scale, AI offers farmers greater control over breeding cycles. Calving seasons can be synchronised with feed availability, helping stabilise production even during dry periods. Over time, improved genetics contribute to stronger animals, faster growth rates and more uniform carcass quality factors that are critical for meeting export specifications.

Strengthening Export Competitiveness

For Eswatini, enhancing breeding systems is not merely about improving farm-level productivity; it is about safeguarding and expanding its position in premium markets. The EU market demands traceability and consistency, both of which depend on predictable herd performance and reliable supply volumes.

Improved genetics translate into better meat yield and quality, reinforcing the country's ability to meet stringent European standards. As national herd quality improves, processors benefit from more consistent throughput, while traders, feed suppliers and veterinary service providers operate within a more stable and predictable value chain.

The AI initiative forms part of the Eswatini Livestock Value Chain Development Programme (ELVCDP), implemented under the broader "Eswatini: Promoting Growth Through Competitive Alliances" programme supported by the European Union and delivered by the International Trade Centre in partnership with government.

By investing in frontline capacity, the programme seeks to build a resilient production base capable of sustaining export growth. Rather than relying solely on external market access, the strategy focuses on strengthening domestic systems ensuring that farmers have the tools, knowledge and services required to compete internationally.

As global markets grow increasingly

competitive, productivity gains at farm level will determine whether Eswatini can deepen its footprint in high-value destinations. Artificial insemination, once viewed as a specialised veterinary intervention, is now being recognised as a cornerstone of export readiness.

If successfully scaled, the initiative could mark a turning point for the beef industry one where science, skills and market access converge to unlock new growth potential. In the quest to strengthen exports and build resilience, the future of Eswatini's beef sector may well begin with better breeding.

WOMAN FARMER WINNER BATTLES HEATWAVE & DROUGHT

BY PHESHEYA KUNENE - EDITOR

> The heat is unforgiving, You water today, tomorrow the soil is dry again

A farm under pressure

The sounds give it away: a milking bucket, indigenous chickens, a tractor cooling under a marula tree. This is no ordinary homestead. At its centre stands Olivia Eli Dlamini, Woman Farmer of the Year 2025, facing one of the harshest farming seasons in recent memory.

March heat has stripped moisture from the soil. Maize leaves curl. A first bean crop has struggled despite irrigation.

"The heat is unforgiving," she says. "You water today, tomorrow the soil is dry again."

Still, production continues. Livestock move, workers prepare feed, and the farm refuses to slow.

Loss that reshaped the business

Resilience came through hard lessons. Stock theft claimed 36 goats in one night. Disease earlier reduced her cattle herd. Each shock forced change.

Diversification became survival: dairy for daily income, poultry for fast turnover, crossbred cattle for adaptability, and irrigation to reduce dependence on rainfall.

"You can't rely on one stream anymore," Olivia explains. "Climate and crime both demand a plan."

A structured agribusiness

Today the farm runs as a business, not a seasonal gamble. Over 90 cattle anchor operations. The dairy produces about 70 litres a day, sold locally. More than 300 indigenous chickens supply a steady market.

Income rotates across enterprises, cushioning crop losses.

"Milk keeps the farm moving," she says. "Chickens cover costs. Crops become growth money when the season allows."

Mechanisation and control

The tractor she won through national competition has changed operations. Land preparation is faster, planting windows are met, and irrigation is targeted through pumps and storage tanks.

New land is being cleared for beans and vegetables, with drip irrigation and shade nets planned to reduce heat stress.

"The weather is no longer predictable," Olivia notes. "So our systems must be."

Managing the March squeeze

March is a turning point. Soil moisture drops, pest pressure shifts, and winter planning begins. On Olivia's farm, irrigated plots are prioritised, rain-fed risk reduced, and planting schedules adjusted.

Across Eswatini, similar pressures are pushing farmers toward water-efficient and protected cropping systems.

Her cattle programme combines Nguni hardiness, Jersey milk yield and Brahman adaptability. Poultry is managed carefully, with early separation, structured feeding and controlled free-range transition to reduce losses and stabilise supply.

This is climate adaptation through management, not technology alone.

Olivia is now targeting retail and restaurant markets, including branded indigenous chicken sales. Transport remains the next challenge. "Production is only half the business," she says. "Delivery is the other half."

Stronger than one season

As evening milking begins, irrigation lines are checked and chickens settle. Some fields show stress, others promise. Winter crops are being prepared under controlled conditions.

"The season is tough," Olivia reflects, "but the farm is stronger than one season."

The heatwave may have reduced yields, but it has not slowed the enterprise. In Kashoba, Olivia Dlamini is not waiting for better weather—she is building a farm designed to withstand it.

HOW BEEKEEPING IS BRIDGING ESWATINI'S HONEY GAP THROUGH LOCAL PRODUCTION

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

MANZINI – When heavy rains destroyed Siphesihle Dlamini's bean crop in 2024, it nearly ended his farming ambitions. Instead, the loss pushed him toward a more climate-resilient enterprise: beekeeping.

Rather than replanting crops vulnerable to erratic weather, Dlamini invested in bees. Today, 20 beehives in Mzilikazi form the foundation of Opulento Farms, supplying pure, locally produced honey to a growing market.

"I saw there is money in honey," Dlamini said. "People complain that some honey has too much syrup. I wanted to produce pure, natural honey."

A growing gap in local honey supply

Despite rising demand, Eswatini's honey industry remains small. Local producers generate about 35 tonnes annually, while demand continues to outpace supply.

In 2023, approximately 28 tonnes of honey were imported, mainly from South Africa, bringing total availability on the local market to around 63 tonnes. Exports remain minimal.

These figures point to a clear opportunity for local producers to expand and reduce reliance on imports.

Why Lubombo suits beekeeping

The Lubombo region offers favourable conditions for apiculture, including natural vegetation, diverse flowering plants and suitable climate. Its low population density also allows apiaries to be located safely away from residential areas, improving both safety and colony productivity.

For Dlamini, this suitability turned climate loss into business potential.

Building the apiary from scratch

Dlamini established his apiary on one hectare in Mzilikazi, placing hives more than 400 metres from homes to meet safety requirements.

To keep costs manageable, he constructed wooden hives from recycled pallets instead of buying commercial hives that cost about E1,500 each. This approach allowed gradual expansion without heavy debt.

Each hive houses a queen, workers and drones, and maintaining colony health is central to long-term productivity. His essential equipment includes a protective suit, smoker, hive tool and bee brush.

Understanding the production cycle

Beekeeping follows seasonal cycles. After a colony is established, farmers wait about three months before harvesting.

Honey production peaks in spring, particularly after July, when flowering plants are abundant. Bees collect nectar, convert it through natural enzymes and store it as honey in combs.

Under favourable conditions, one hive can produce up to 20 litres per harvest, though changing rainfall patterns are beginning to affect nectar availability.

Managing risks in apiculture

Beekeeping carries risks such as ants, termites, spider webs, veld fires and theft. Regular hive inspections, clearing surrounding vegetation and monitoring entrances are critical management practices.

Although bees do not require daily feeding like livestock, beekeeping demands patience, discipline and technical understanding.

"You must be prepared, or wear proper protective clothing," Dlamini said when advising young farmers. "This is not quick money."

From honey to value addition

Opulento Farms packages honey in 375g and 500g squeeze bottles, supplying households and restaurants in Siteki. While volumes are not yet sufficient for major retailers, Dlamini plans to scale production by increasing productive colonies.

He is also exploring funding through the Eswatini Agricultural Development Fund (EADF) to support expansion.

Beyond honey, beekeeping offers additional income through beeswax, propolis and pollen, which are used in cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and wellness products.

"There is money across the value chain if you do it seriously," he said.

Building a sustainable brand

Dlamini's long-term vision includes launching Opulento Scents, a beeswax-based product line featuring aromatherapy candles and lip balms. The brand will focus on eco-friendly packaging to meet growing consumer demand for sustainable products.

However, limited capital and access to environmentally friendly packaging materials remain key challenges.

Climate-smart agriculture for the future

Beekeeping is increasingly recognised as a climate-smart agricultural activity. It requires minimal land, no irrigation and supports crop pollination, improving overall agricultural productivity.

Dlamini's journey from storm-damaged bean fields to a thriving apiary reflects a broader shift in Eswatini's agriculture—one driven by innovation, diversification and resilience.

While his 20 hives may be modest, they signal growing potential for local production, food security and economic independence, proving that climate challenges can also create new opportunities.

TURNING WAITING INTO WEALTH: A TEACHER'S RISE IN THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

BY SIBUSISO MNGADI | EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

MALINDZA – When Melusi Dlamini completed his Primary Teachers Diploma in 2019, he expected to begin his professional journey in the classroom. Instead, delayed employment opportunities forced him to make a decision that would reshape his future. He returned home to Malindza and chose dairy farming.

What began as a temporary income solution has evolved into a structured livestock enterprise one built not merely on owning cows, but on understanding genetics, feeding systems, hygiene, breeding cycles and market alignment.

"I trained as a teacher, but while waiting for employment I had to find something that can feed me. Dairy was the closest business to what I already understood at home," Melusi says.

Today, his operation reflects a broader shift in Eswatini's agricultural landscape where young people are treating farming as business, not fallback.

A DAILY SECTOR WITH ROOM TO GROW

Melusi's journey is unfolding within a national dairy market that still depends heavily on imports.

Eswatini's milk demand is estimated at approximately 88 million litres per year, yet local production stands at about 22 million litres. This leaves a supply gap of nearly 66 million litres annually milk that must be sourced from outside the country.

Per-capita dairy consumption is estimated at around 90 litres per year, with total consumption reaching approximately 88.4 million litres (liquid milk equivalents) in 2020. The sector is valued at over SZL 915 million and supports more than 1,800 jobs.

Import data illustrates the scale of dependency. In October 2025 alone, Eswatini imported approximately 2.7 million Kg/L of dairy and dairy-related products. UHT milk accounted for 42% of the month's total, while other imports included yoghurt, margarine, whey powder, creamers and emasi. From January to October 2025, total dairy imports reached nearly 23.7 million Kg/L.

For farmers like Melusi, those numbers represent opportunity provided production is consistent and quality meets formal market standards.

BUILDING A SYSTEM, NOT JUST A HERD

Melusi quickly realised that dairy success depends on structure. He strengthened his technical foundation through training offered by the Eswatini Dairy Board, including

dairy production management and artificial insemination (AI). He also visited other farmers to observe daily routines and troubleshoot common production constraints.

His enterprise now rests on five pillars. He prioritises heifer pipeline management to ensure replacement stock and maintain long-term productivity. He uses controlled breeding through artificial insemination to improve genetics and increase milk yields. He focuses on balanced rations designed to feed for production rather than mere survival. He maintains strict animal health and parasite control routines through regular deworming and monitoring. Finally, he safeguards hygiene and milk handling standards to preserve quality from milking to market.

For Melusi, dairy is not about quantity alone, it is about systems that sustain output.

WHY DAIRY OFFERS STABILITY

Unlike seasonal crop enterprises, dairy provides potential for steady cash flow when production is managed correctly and buyers are secured.

In a country that continues to import millions of litres of dairy products annually, local farmers who can guarantee quality and volume have a pathway into formal supply chains including processors and supermarkets.

Melusi believes dairy remains one of the most structured and reliable livestock enterprises in Eswatini when approached professionally.

THE ROAD AHEAD

His long-term vision includes securing land dedicated to a mini-commercial dairy farm, expanding herd numbers strategically, investing in improved infrastructure, and supplying larger formal markets.

From classroom training to cowshed management, Melusi Dlamini represents a generation redefining agriculture in Eswatini.

His story is not simply about career change. It is about recognising market gaps, building technical capacity, and treating livestock farming as an enterprise.

In a dairy sector valued at nearly a billion emalangeni with millions of litres still imported each year farmers like Melusi are not just producing milk.

They are building businesses.

TURNING FALLOW LAND INTO LONG-TERM INCOME THROUGH WATTLE FARMING

BY SIBUSISIWE NDZIMANDZE | JOURNALIST

In the rural landscapes of Sicunusa, land that once lay idle is slowly transforming into a source of long-term wealth and economic security. For many farmers, fallow land is no longer viewed as unused space, but as an opportunity to invest in the future through sustainable forestry.

Through the Kusile maSwati Project, implemented by Montigny Investments, farmers are being encouraged to turn underutilised land into productive black wattle plantations. The initiative is reshaping how rural communities view land ownership, productivity and long-term investment.

The project promotes black wattle farming as a climate-resilient income strategy that supports rural livelihoods, creates seasonal employment and strengthens local participation in the forestry value chain.

Rather than demanding large-scale investment upfront, the programme allows farmers to start small and expand gradually as they gain experience and financial returns.

Several farmers in the Sicunusa area have already embraced the model, including neighbours Barend Steenkamp and Malinga Bheki, who are among the early beneficiaries of the initiative.

Reimagining Fallow Land as Economic Opportunity

The Kusile maSwati Project is built on a simple but powerful philosophy land should generate long-term economic value while maintaining environmental sustainability.

Farmers participating in the programme are encouraged to prioritise food production first before allocating portions of their land to forestry. This approach ensures household food security is protected while still allowing families to generate additional income through timber production.

The black wattle planting season runs from October to the end of March each year. This period allows farmers enough time to prepare land, acquire seedlings and plan plantation development according to their household and financial needs.

Black wattle trees are particularly attractive to rural farmers because they require relatively low maintenance once established, yet provide stable income over long production cycles.

From Seedlings to Community Employment

According to JB Timber General Manager and project beneficiary Barend Steenkamp, the project is already generating measurable economic and social benefits.

"We received 208 trays last year and they have already been planted. The 210 trays we have received today will add onto what is already in the ground, bringing the total to around 31 hectares," Steenkamp said.

Beyond land development, the project is also supporting local employment. Planting and maintenance activities have created seasonal job opportunities for community members.

"About 35 temporary workers have helped with the planting," Steenkamp said. "This shows that this project is not just about planting trees; it is about creating jobs, supporting families, and demonstrating that forestry can be a long-term source of income for our community."

For many rural households, such employment opportunities provide critical supplementary income, particularly during agricultural off-seasons.

Environmental Protection and Sustainable Forestry

While economic growth is a central objective, environmental conservation remains a key priority of the programme.

Project Manager Victor Zwane emphasised that forestry development must coexist with water resource protection and biodiversity conservation.

"We encourage farmers to plant black wattle and ensure that plantations are at least 30 metres away from river lines so that water sources are not affected," Zwane said.

He explained that black wattle trees take approximately nine years to mature before farmers can realise major financial returns. This long growth cycle encourages farmers to view forestry as a long-term investment rather than a quick profit venture.

Sustainable forestry practices are also reinforced through community cooperation. Farmers participating in the project are encouraged to work together to protect plantations, particularly during the dry fire season when plantations and surrounding forests are vulnerable to wildfires.

Collective responsibility has become a central feature of plantation

management within the Kusile maSwati initiative.

Strengthening Rural Economies Through Forestry

The Kusile maSwati Project forms part of broader efforts to diversify rural income sources in Eswatini. Forestry has increasingly been recognised as a strategic economic sector capable of generating employment, supporting export industries and strengthening community development.

Seedling distribution and plantation support are coordinated by project leadership, including Madibha Dlamini, Head of the Kusile maSwati Project, who officiated the most recent seedling handover together with Zwane.

Montigny Investments has reaffirmed that the programme remains open to any landowner with suitable fallow land who wishes to participate in forestry production.

By enabling landowners to convert idle land into productive assets, the initiative supports both economic development and environmental sustainability.

Investing in the Future

For participating farmers, black wattle farming represents more than just tree planting, it is a long-term financial strategy. While returns may take nearly a decade to fully materialise, the long production cycle provides stable market opportunities once trees reach maturity.

As demand for timber and forestry products continues to grow, farmers who invest early stand to benefit from future market prices.

Through the Kusile maSwati Project, Montigny Investments is demonstrating how rural land can be transformed into sustainable wealth-generating assets while protecting natural ecosystems.

For farmers in Sicunusa, wattle farming is proving that sometimes the best investments are the ones that grow slowly quietly turning fallow land into long-term financial security for families and communities across Eswatini.

HOW UNESWA HORTICULTURE IS GROWING THE FUTURE OF FOOD

BY: SIKHONA SIBANDZE | JOURNALIST

On the rolling green landscapes of Luyengo, where science meets soil, the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) is nurturing more than crops. It is cultivating a national vision: stronger food security, farmer empowerment, and a modern horticulture industry that can compete, innovate, and create jobs.

Often mistaken for "gardening", horticulture is a science-intensive discipline focused on producing fruits, vegetables, and other high-value crops efficiently and commercially. At UNESWA's Faculty of Agriculture, based at Luyengo Campus, students are trained through both classroom learning and practical systems designed to prepare them for real-world production and research.

Dr Kwanele Nxumalo, Head of the Horticulture Department, says the programme exists because Eswatini's food future cannot depend on imports. "Horticulture is a programme that teaches students to grow fruits and vegetables using science," he said. "It was introduced to help fulfil the government's mandate to reduce imports and prioritise growing for ourselves as a country."

A programme anchored in national priorities

UNESWA's broader institutional mission is framed around excellence in teaching and learning, research and innovation, entrepreneurship, and community engagement for sustainable development. Horticulture sits squarely in that mandate: training graduates who can contribute as producers, agripreneurs, researchers, extension professionals, and innovators, people who understand that profitability depends on more than just yield. The department's vision, Nxumalo says, is clear: train students who will succeed in the horticultural sector, then extend that impact beyond the university gates.

Training that goes beyond the classroom

As climate pressure, input costs and market competition tighten across the region, the department wants learning to reach working farmers and agribusiness practitioners through short, practical programmes. "Our vision is to train students who will be successful in the horticultural sector," Nxumalo said. "But our role goes beyond students. We also want to introduce short programmes that allow us to lecture individuals and farmers who are already active in agriculture."

It's a shift that matters. Short courses, targeted at irrigation planning, pest and disease management, protected cultivation, nursery management, grading and post-harvest handling, can raise farmer performance quickly, especially in a sector where small mistakes can wipe out returns.

Partnerships that strengthen the value chain

Collaboration is central to the department's strategy. UNESWA works with sector partners, including PELUM Eswatini and NAMBoard, to strengthen exposure to industry realities and build linkages that support farmer success and student readiness. But the department is candid about the structural barriers that still limit growth, especially market access. "Many farmers still struggle to reach markets because they are far from them," Nxumalo noted.

For horticulture, distance is costly: higher transport bills, more spoilage, weaker negotiating power, and reduced consistency in supply. UNESWA's approach pushes beyond "produce more" to "sell better" supporting the idea that farmers must have diversified buyer options, stronger market linkages, and more open channels that reward quality and reliability.

The seed constraint: a hidden bottleneck

Another constraint sits quietly behind many production failures: seed access. Nxumalo says Eswatini's horticulture seed system remains heavily dependent on imports, which restricts variety choice and can disrupt planting plans. Imported seed dependence, in practice, means farmers are often boxed into limited options, varieties that may not be ideal for local conditions, market preference, shelf life, or disease resistance. Over time, that limits competitiveness and growth.

ARISE: powering research with industry impact

While training remains central, research is increasingly defining the department's trajectory, particularly through the ARISE project (African Research Initiative for Scientific Excellence), funded by the European Union and implemented by the African Academy of Sciences with support from the European Commission and African Union structures.

That research momentum was visible in early 2026 when the department gained regional recognition at the Combined Congress hosted by North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa. UNESWA's delegation showcased work with practical relevance to horticultural crop cultivation and plant biotechnology, supported by ARISE.

A major highlight was Thandiswa Maphanga, a Master's student in the Plant Biotechnology research group, who received a Best Poster Presentation Award for her study on plant growth regulators in micropropagation of red pepper (Capsicum annuum). The achievement underscored the department's direction: solution-driven research linked to food security, crop improvement, and cost pressures in planting material.

Preparing students for the next technological wave

The department is also watching the global shift toward automation, precision systems and AI-enabled agriculture, and Nxumalo believes Eswatini's training must keep pace. "As we teach, we must align with technology," he said, pointing to how other countries are already using advanced machinery and robotics in planting and harvesting. For UNESWA, the opportunity is not only to teach about technology, but to embed it into learning: mechanised nursery systems, protected cultivation tools, irrigation automation, sensor-based monitoring, and data-driven crop decisions, practical innovations that can lift consistency and market readiness.

Why this matters now

UNESWA Horticulture is steadily positioning itself as an innovation pipeline for Eswatini's agribusiness future, training people, supporting farmers, building partnerships, and producing research that speaks to real constraints like seed access and market distance. In a country striving for greater self-reliance, the work at Luyengo is planting something bigger than crops: capacity, competitiveness, and the foundations of a stronger food system, one season, one student, and one farmer at a time.

YOUNG FARMER SELLING 30 RABBITS PER MONTH

BY: PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

The morning breaks to the clatter of wire cages and the soft thump of restless rabbits as Kwanele Seyama moves down the line, measuring feed with a practised hand and checking nest boxes like a production manager on a factory floor.

At Emantimandze Rabbit Farm, this is not a hobby. It is a disciplined, income generating system built by a young man who turned one gift rabbit into a structured agribusiness.

Seyama, 31, entered farming during the COVID 19 economic slowdown after receiving a single female rabbit from his sister. What began as curiosity quickly evolved into research, record keeping and breed selection. Three years later, his operation has grown to 108 rabbits, anchored on New Zealand White, Californian, Giant Chinchilla and Dutch lines known for fast growth and high litter performance.

"I realised this could be a business when the first litter came," he said. "From there I started studying breeding, feeding and markets."

His production model reflects commercial intent. Three breeding bucks service more than 100 does under controlled mating schedules. Feed is calibrated for meat output, 70 percent hay, 10 percent green forage and 20 percent pellets, while strict daily sanitation and natural deworming with pawpaw leaves keep mortality low.

The result is consistent turnover. Seyama sells an average of 30 rabbits per month for meat, pets and breeding stock, generating over E3,500. Additional income comes from rabbit urine marketed as liquid organic fertiliser, a product increasingly sought by crop farmers.

"The demand is higher than my

supply," he said. "My challenge now is scaling cages and equipment."

Multiple Revenue Streams, One System

Unlike many small livestock ventures that rely on single markets, Seyama runs a diversified model. Live sales supply new entrants into rabbit farming, slaughter stock targets household protein markets and fertiliser products feed into the growing organic crop sector. He is also in talks with retail buyers, positioning rabbit meat for formal market entry.

Regional agricultural development studies identify rabbit production as one of the fastest scaling micro livestock systems in Southern Africa. A single doe can produce up to 40 offspring per year under good management, offering rapid herd expansion and regular cash flow. With youth unemployment above 30 percent in several SADC countries, low capital livestock systems are being promoted as entry points into agribusiness.

Training the Next Wave

Seyama has extended his role beyond producer to trainer, hosting practical sessions on housing design, breeding control, feeding regimes, hygiene and farm record systems. His workshops attract both aspiring and struggling farmers.

"Most losses come from inbreeding, poor cleaning and wrong feeding," he said. "Once farmers fix those, productivity improves."

By encouraging breed exchange and market coordination, he is quietly building a network of small producers capable of supplying larger buyers collectively, a model aligned with cooperative value chain development.

Protein of the Future

Nutrition experts continue to promote rabbit meat as a lean, high protein alternative with low cholesterol and efficient feed conversion. Its short production cycle and minimal land requirements make it ideal for peri urban youth and climate constrained farming systems.

With cattle movement periodically affected by disease outbreaks, small livestock such as rabbits are increasingly viewed as buffers for national protein supply and household income stability.

Constraints and Strategic Needs

Despite steady growth, infrastructure remains the main bottleneck. Limited cage space restricts herd expansion and reduces the farm's capacity to harvest urine and manure at commercial scale. Seyama also identified the need for a pellet making machine to cut feed costs and improve margins.

"Support in equipment would double my production and help supply more farmers," he said.

Scaling a Rural Enterprise

His long term plan includes increasing breeding stock, securing formal retail contracts, processing manure and urine into branded fertiliser products and establishing a dedicated rabbit training academy.

With start up capital estimated at about E1,000 for basic cages and breeding pairs, rabbit farming presents one of the lowest barriers to entry for young people with limited land and resources.

At Emantimandze, the steady rhythm of feeding, cleaning and breeding is more than routine. It is a business model, a training centre and a proof of concept that modern agripreneurship can grow from the smallest livestock unit.

For Eswatini's youth searching for viable entry points into agriculture, Seyama's operation offers a practical blueprint, structured production, diversified markets and knowledge transfer. In the quiet industry of his hutches, a new agricultural economy is taking shape, one litter at a time.

DROXFORD FOODS REPLACING PEANUT BUTTER, OIL IMPORTS ONE BOTTLE AT A TIME

BY: PHESHEYA KUNENE | EDITOR

An engineer has established a peanut butter and peanut oil processing plant at Sidvwashini Industrial Sites, Mbabane, positioning Droxford Foods to reduce Eswatini's reliance on imported spreads while creating a local market for groundnut farmers.

Doctor Hlongwane, an engineer by profession and processor by purpose, has turned Droxford Foods into a growing player in the country's agro-processing sector. What began with a household blender has developed into a laboratory-tested operation supplying major wholesalers such as Ruchi, Top Ten and Cash and Carry, placing locally produced peanut butter on shelves traditionally dominated by imports.

"I asked myself what will sustain me after retirement and what will benefit the country at the same time. Processing peanuts answered both," he said.

IMPORT GAP CREATES MARKET

Eswatini continues to spend significant foreign currency on imported processed foods, including peanut butter and cooking oils, despite suitable conditions for local groundnut production. The dominance of imported brands has historically limited opportunities for domestic processors and smallholder farmers.

Doctor Hlongwane views that imbalance as a commercial opportunity.

"Every locally produced jar replaces an imported one. That keeps money in the economy and creates a value chain for farmers," he said.

ENGINEERING APPROACH TO FOOD

Applying engineering precision,

he subjected his products to local laboratory testing before sending samples to Cape Town for further quality validation to ensure compliance with international food safety standards.

"As engineers we work with systems and standards. I applied the same discipline to food processing," he said.

Droxford Foods now produces multiple packaging sizes for households, resellers and institutions, while its pure peanut oil targets cooking and catering markets.

MARKET ACCESS STRATEGY

He identified distribution as a major challenge for emerging processors and opted to partner with wholesalers to achieve national reach while promoting the brand at agricultural fairs and farmers' markets.

"Production alone is not enough. Market access and partnerships determine survival," he said.

VALUE ADDITION FOR FARMERS

The company sources peanuts locally, supporting smallholder producers and strengthening the agricultural value chain. Peanut butter remains one of the most affordable protein sources for households and school feeding programmes, offering high energy, healthy fats and vitamin E.

Regional agricultural development studies indicate that value addition to groundnuts increases farmer incomes and reduces dependence on imported processed foods across Southern Africa.

EXPORT POTENTIAL

With quality standards already achieved, Droxford Foods is preparing for regional market entry within SADC, targeting demand for natural, additive-free spreads.

"Our goal is to see a proudly Eswatini product competing beyond our borders," he said.

RETIREMENT PLAN WITH ECONOMIC IMPACT

Operating from the Sidvwashini industrial site, the enterprise forms part of the founder's post-retirement strategy while contributing to agro-industrial development.

"This is not only about my future. It is about building local industry and supporting farmers," he said.

Droxford Foods demonstrates how technical expertise can be redirected into agro-processing to reduce imports, create jobs and expand domestic food manufacturing capacity.

NAMBOARD BEGINS ROADSHOWS FOR HORTICULTURE FARMERS

BY: SIKHONA SIBANDZE | JOURNALIST

Horticulture farmers across Eswatini will receive direct, practical guidance on markets, pricing, post-harvest handling and the Eswatini Horticulture Information System (EHIS) as the National Agricultural Marketing Board (NAMBoard) takes its Farmer Roadshows 2026 to all four regions this March.

The roadshows come as NAMBoard moves to make EHIS registration compulsory for all farmers producing agricultural schedule products. The shift is aimed at strengthening market coordination, reducing avoidable losses and helping farmers produce with clearer demand signals rather than guesswork.

NAMBoard CEO Bhekizwe Maziya describes EHIS as both a protection tool for farmers and a planning tool for the market. "EHIS is about making sure decisions in the sector are based on accurate, timely information," Maziya said. "When farmers capture what they've planted, how much they expect to harvest, where they are, and when the produce will be ready, the market can respond in an organised way and farmers are better protected."

Roadshow schedule (08:30 AM):
Hhohho Region — Motjane RDA (05 March 2026)
Lubombo Region — Siphofaneni RDA (12 March 2026)
Shiselweni Region — Lavumisa Packhouse (19 March 2026)
Manzini Region — Luve RDA (26 March 2026)

Farmers attending can expect practical guidance on producing for the market, including how planting decisions affect price, what drives price differences (quality, grading, timing, packaging, volumes and buyer requirements), and how to reduce post-harvest losses through better handling, packaging, storage and transport. NAMBoard will also explain grading standards and compliance requirements that determine access to higher-value markets such as supermarkets, packhouses and processors, while strengthening linkages with buyers, aggregators and traders.

EHIS will be a central focus, including why registration is becoming mandatory, how to register correctly, and how to update production details consistently to improve market visibility and prevent market flooding. NAMBoard says registration support will be available during the roadshows.

Attendance is encouraged for all horticulture farmers, youth and emerging farmers, commercial growers, and cooperatives seeking more predictable sales and stronger returns.

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