



Bring back herding

Researchers say government could save millions by training herders instead of erecting fences on land-reform farms. **Roelof Bezuidenhout** reports.

One man and a good dog will be more cost effective than expensive fencing and water infrastructure in arid areas.

ROELOF BEZUIDENHOUT

THE ADVENT OF FENCING AND rotational grazing systems in the 1920s put paid to the art of herding, where shepherds lived with and looked after flocks. More recently, labour laws and a lack of interest in herding have turned it into a forgotten occupation in commercial farming areas. But a few holistic managers still use herders for strip grazing, along with electrified lines, and in Turkey, livestock-guarding dogs accompany full-time shepherds with great success on inhospitable terrain.

Now, a team of South African researchers say herding should be used on Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) farms as it has many benefits, including opening up more jobs, particularly in the arid regions.

Prof Doreen Atkinson of Free State University, along with Clement Cupido, Igshaan Samuels, and Melvin Swarts of the Agricultural Research Council's Rangeland and Nutrition Unit at Western Cape University, told the Arid Zone Ecology Forum conference at Gariiep Dam that controlled herding can cut fencing costs – averaging about R15/m – to release millions for the state to buy land

for redistribution. Proper herding would eliminate the need for building and maintaining internal fencing on livestock farms, reduce costs for stock watering infrastructure, and reduce stock theft and predation, which can lower household income by between 30% and 75%.

They claimed that losses on herded farms in southern Namibia were negligible and that good herders detect diseases and other problems early as they're close to the animals. But the perception that herding is bad for the veld and that only multi-camp systems are acceptable, will hinder the practice's revival. But herding, say the researchers, has many benefits where there are too few camps for proper veld management.

One man and a dog can even control grazing movements of a large herd, using virtual lines between beacons, without damage to biodiversity. Trampling and overgrazing can be avoided and gin-trap use reduced so meat could be branded as predator-friendly. They say government should invest in manpower instead of in fencing and set up a herding academy in communal areas to train a new line of professional herders. |fw

← and transported to a charcoal plant on the Agulhas Plain.

As for the wetlands, Rory says, "Nearly a quarter of the region's wetlands have been lost to land use as landowners farm more intensively, and we aim to protect wetlands against this." The SMA is important as a number of lakes, such as the Zoetendalsvlei and Voëlvlei, are included in the area. A

pilot project on the Kastiings River, to rehabilitate the peat and the indigenous vegetation, is underway using wood chips from alien vegetation. In the past, riverbank and wetland restoration was tackled using heavy machinery, disturbing riverbanks to create big stone-filled gabion structures. "In the SMA, we've replaced these structures with 'eco-logs', small jute tubes or stockings

Analysing the economic impact of GM crops

DR GRAHAM BROOKES AND DR PETER Barfoot from PG Economics in the UK, with international collaborators, led the economic analysis of genetically modified (GM) crops. Their work proves that GM crops raise world food supplies, with fewer inputs and on less land.

Their 2008 report showed that together, insect resistance and herbicide tolerance added 53 million tons to global soya bean crops and 47 million tons to maize for the 1996 to 2006 period. Herbicide tolerance upped global canola crops by over 3 million tons. From 1996 to 2008, herbicide tolerance reduced herbicide use – 50 000t less active ingredient was used on soya beans, 111 000t less on maize and 13 000t less on canola. Insect resistance reduced pesticide use by 39 000t on maize and 140 000t on cotton.

Dr Brookes's January 2010 update looked at the impact that not using GM traits would have. He predicted a 9,6% rise in soya bean commodity prices, 8,9% for soya meal, and 5,8% for maize grain. If no GM crops were grown, national crop production (both GM and non-GM), based on 2006 adoption rates, would drop by 5,1% in South Africa, 5,6% in Argentina, and 2,6% in the US and Canada. Soya bean crops would fall by 6% to 8% in these four countries.

More hectares would be cultivated. Farmers would earn less and higher costs would be passed on to consumers. The environmental benefits of less chemicals and tractor use and more conservation farming would also be lost. – Wynand van der Walt, wynandjvdw@telkomsa.net
• Source: Brookes and Barfoot, 2008, 2010. |fw

filled with wood chips. Through the eco-logs, we're damming small areas, creating living space for animals and plants, and rehydrating peat without affecting water movement throughout the river system."

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