

# Cotton farming becomes viable diversification option for SA canegrowers

The SA Canegrowers Association will be presenting the outcomes of a recently concluded cotton diversification pilot project to the Sugarcane Value Chain Masterplan Task Team on diversification. The findings represent an avenue for the sugar industry to explore in pursuit of viable diversification options for canegrowers in South Africa.



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The successful pilot project follows a new crop diversification report that was commissioned by SA Canegrowers in October 2020, which identified potentially suitable alternative crops that can be grown by cane growers to help ensure the survival of the sugar industry.

Confirming the findings of the [report](#), the project showed that small-scale farmers situated near a cotton gin can benefit from diversifying into irrigated cotton as a break outcrop. Break outcrops are secondary crops grown to interrupt the repeated sowing of cane as part of crop rotation.

The project was part of an International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labeling (ISEAL) initiative to close the financing gap for small-scale farmers. World Wildlife Fund South Africa provided funding and Cotton South Africa provided mentorship.

## Diversify farm operations

SA Canegrowers board member Mfundo Msimango dedicated one hectare of farmland in Mpumalanga to the project. Planting took place in December 2020. By April, 95% of the crop was mature with the last of the cotton being picked in June.

In total, Msimango harvested 22 bales of cotton, 3,857kg. At a price of R6,99/kg, this brought in an additional R27,000 in revenue. The diversification report notes that new genetically modified varieties of cotton could increase yields to 4,000-5,000 kg per hectare, and could bring in up to R34,950 in revenue per hectare.

Msimango's harvest is even more impressive considering the challenges he faced.

In January 2021, tropical cyclone Eloise hit South Africa after wreaking havoc in Mozambique and Madagascar. Mpumalanga was one of the hardest hit provinces. As a result, Eloise killed a portion of the cotton crop after the land became waterlogged.

Despite this, the pilot project provided crucial lessons for cane farmers who wish to diversify their farming operations.

First, cotton is ideal for use as a rotational crop as it promotes both weed and disease control during the break crop or fallow period.



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Another benefit of cotton farming is the low barrier to entry. Cotton has lower start-up costs than alternative orchard crops in particular. Cotton gins often lease equipment to farmers, ensuring that new entrants need not buy all the equipment they need upfront.

However, critical to diversifying into cotton is proximity to a cotton gin. This is why the northern irrigated regions of Mpumalanga have been identified as most suitable as there is already a cotton gin on the Makathini Flats. Moreover, a Mpumalanga cooperative has formed a partnership with the National Empowerment Fund to establish its own local gin.

## Cotton farming benefits

In terms of skills, Msimango found cane and cotton to be similar enough that he could easily adapt to cotton farming. And compared to cane, he found that cotton required less tilling, less fertiliser and cheaper chemicals, minimising the cost of making the shift.

Because harvesting machinery is also very expensive, cotton harvesting is labour intensive as most cotton in South Africa is handpicked. While cane remains more labour intensive than cotton, cotton can provide supplementary income and employment in rural communities.

Crucially, the project was only possible because Msimango had fallow land to devote to it. Many small-scale growers in South Africa farm on an average of 5 hectares. Fallowing just 1 hectare would cut 20% of their income, which is why many small-scale growers currently can't afford to rotate their crops. To assist small-scale growers, government should consider releasing more land to them to enable them to practice rotational farming and reap the many benefits this brings.

Projects like these are invaluable for the sugar industry, which has in recent times been under threat due to a confluence of local and global factors including weak protection against cheap imports, unprecedented droughts, plunging world sugar prices, political unrest, and a drop in local demand for sugar due to the introduction of the sugar tax.

This diversification pilot is just one of the projects SA Canegrowers has participated in which aim to identify opportunities for canegrowers to diversify their crops and sources of income. Earlier this year SA Canegrowers also presented findings on its research with the Roundtable on Sustainable Biofuels demonstrating the feasibility of diverting cane to the production of sustainable aviation fuels (SAF) to build a local biofuels industry.

"SA Canegrowers will continue to work on crop and value chain diversification to ensure that canegrowers are less vulnerable to global shocks and demand side pressures on the industry. We look forward to presenting more constructive proposals to the industry and government as we continue to build innovative and strategic partnerships to take advantage of opportunities that will ensure the future sustainability of the industry," says Andre Russel, chairman of the SA Canegrowers Association.

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