

**Publication:** Business Day - Main

**Title:** Farmers plant more, but rain is needed badly now

**Publish date:** 30 Jan 2025

**Page:** 3

**Reach:** 13167

**AVE:** R 24233.56

**Author:** Jana Marx

GRAINS AND OILSEEDS

# Farmers plant more, but rain is needed badly now

Jana Marx

Economics Correspondent

The latest planted area data shows a slight improvement over the previous season, but agriculture is not out of the woods yet, warn economists.

Marguerite Pienaar, agricultural economist at Grain SA, cautioned that some regions in the country desperately needed follow-up rains within the next week or two to prevent crop losses.

The warning came despite the latest data from the crop estimates committee (CEC) reflecting a modest increase in the total area planted for summer grains and oilseeds.

Preliminary data released on Tuesday indicated that the total planted area had risen 0.3% since the 2023/24 season, reaching 4.45-million hectares.

"While the start of SA's 2024/25 crop season was tricky, there remains optimism that farmers likely planted more area than the previous season," said Wandile Sihlobo, Agricultural Business Chamber SA chief economist.

The CEC will release its revised planted area and first production estimates on February 27.

The preliminary data reflects an increase in maize, sunflower and groundnut plantings.

Early estimates for maize suggest growth of 0.38%, equivalent to 6,100ha more than the intended planting area.

"White maize plantings exceeded last year's plantings by 44,950ha – an increase of 2.89%. This is 22,100ha more than the intended planting area," said Pienaar. "Sunflower plant-



**Plantings up:** Early estimates are for 0.38% more maize plantings, or 6,100ha more than intended. /123RF/costaz

ings increased as expected. Preliminary estimates show a 4.35% rise, or 23,000ha more."

Johann Kotze, Agri SA CEO, attributed "99%" of the planting shifts seen in the data to delayed rainfall.

"What is really interesting is the increase in groundnuts – about 12%," he said, explaining that the unfavourable late-rain conditions for many other crops suited groundnuts quite well.

## DROUGHT

According to Pienaar, sunflower plantings increased in part because farmers who missed the optimal planting window for maize and sorghum probably turned to sunflowers and wheat instead.

Despite the expansion in planted area, sufficient rainfall is still crucial, especially for maize plantings, to avoid further losses, Pienaar said.

The CEC data followed a tough previous season, marked

by droughts and exports to neighbouring countries. Additionally, the difficult conditions at the start of the new season are reflected in the drop in yellow maize and soya bean plantings, among other crops.

The CEC data showed soya beans were hit the hardest, with preliminary plantings showing a 2.43% reduction, equivalent to 28,000ha.

"Soya bean performance appears highly variable at this stage. This is 30,700ha less than the intended planting area," Pienaar said.

He said drought conditions in the main production regions, particularly the western Free State, continue to pose risks to overall production.

Early frost was also a major risk this season.

"In the eastern parts of the Free State, we first had a drought, then we had to replant because of the drought, and when it finally rained, it poured – causing even more replanting," said Pienaar.

Regarding the western regions, she said: "If it doesn't rain within the next week or two in the northwestern parts of the Free State we're going to be in serious trouble and risk losing more crops."

Despite these challenges, Sihlobo said he remained optimistic. "Encouragingly, the La Niña prospects suggest we may receive favourable rains during this period (through to March, when the crops are likely to pollinate).

"This supports the view that the 2024/25 season could be a recovery period for SA's agriculture."

marxj@businesslive.co.za