

## **Conservation of natural resources key, but take care not to bureaucratise farm management**

This month, the Directorate of Soil Management in the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development will be receiving inputs on the draft Farm Planning Regulations published under the Conservation of Agricultural Resource Act. You may be forgiven for missing this publication as it was Gazetted on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2020, the same time most of us were basting turkeys and preparing for the evening's festivities. In a nutshell, the draft regulations seek to introduce a system of Farm Plans whereby the Provincial Department of Agriculture can ensure that agricultural activities do not degrade the farm's natural resources.

As per the draft, the regulations will apply to all land currently used for agricultural production (or which may be used for agricultural production in the future), with the exception of urban or conservation land specified in the Act. The draft regulations do, however, note that land under government-funded programmes will be prioritised. The implication is that land owners or users, especially those supported by Government programmes, will need to request the Provincial Department of Agriculture's local office to issue a farm plan for the property in question. The Plan must contain details relating to any soil conservation works on the property and a map detailing the presence of any farm roads, watercourses, springs, boreholes and buildings, amongst other requirements. This will in turn be complimented by a management plan outlining the utilisation of the natural agricultural resources on the farm including elements such as the carrying capacity, size and composition of livestock herds etc.

South Africa is a predominantly arid country with poor soils. All indications also point towards South Africa's climate becoming increasingly variable due to climate change, with the frequency of severe weather conditions such as droughts and floods likely to increase over time. This makes South Africa particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and there is certainly a dire need to adapt and protect our scarce, natural resources. The objective of the Act and the draft Regulations can therefore hardly be faulted. Be that as it may, I have to ask the if additional plans, documents or other 'paper measures' can truly achieve this goal? How do we know this will not merely be another box to tick or add to the mountain of regulatory documents required by law but seldom enforced? These are the hard questions that must surely be asked.

As matters currently stand, the agricultural sector (and the emerging sector in particular), is drowning under the weight of its compliance burden. If we want to sector to grow in a manner that is sustainable and inclusive then we need to focus on improving the ease of doing business and reduce the red-tape associated with carrying on an agricultural enterprise. A farming enterprise is, of course, not only a business but also a custodian of the land and has a duty to safeguard and protect scarce natural resources. There is little doubt that sound management practices and soil conservation must be promoted. However, this must be done in a manner that will incentivise and reward good practices without adding an administrative burden that businesses in the sector as well as the state's own machinery may find impossible to comply with.

The draft Regulations were published on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 and 30 days were allocated for the public to submit written inputs.