

Potatoes South Africa awards the first ever Enterprise Development Farmer of the Year

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Photo Gawie Geyer



Photo caption: Nomvula Xaba, PSA Transformation Manager, Dr André Jooste, CEO PSA, JF Van der Merwe, Chairperson PSA, Phophi Raletjena, PSA Enterprise Development Farmer of the Year and Bernhardt du Toit, Chairperson PSA Transformation Committee

The first ever Potatoes South Africa Enterprise Development Farmer of the Year was announced at the Gala Dinner of the Potatoes South Africa Transformation Symposium held at the Saint George Hotel in Pretoria on 07 June 2018.

The criteria for selecting the three finalists are that the candidate must be a Potatoes South Africa Enterprise Development Programme producer who has been on the programme for at least three years or more. The candidate must plant a minimum of 5 ha of potatoes, be a levy payer and have the ability to pay the required own contribution towards the programme. Candidates must participate in industry meetings and events organized by Potatoes South Africa. Candidates must also participate in the expansion programme or be able to expand without Potatoes South Africa support.

The finalists were Vuyani Kama from Ugie in the Eastern Cape. He started out with 5 ha of potatoes and expanded to 30 ha. He plants predominantly Mondial and Sifra cultivars on dryland. David Phike from Welkom in the Western Free State started out with 5 hectares and expanded to 7 ha. He predominantly plants Mondial under irrigation. Phophi Raletjena from Vivo in Limpopo started out with 5 ha and expanded to 30 ha. He plants Mondial under irrigation.

Through an audited evaluation process Phophi Raletjena was announced as the Potatoes South Africa Enterprise Development Farmer of the Year.

Phophi Raletjena started farming 15 years ago on communal land, planting cabbage. He was assisted by a commercial farmer, Auwke Jongbloed who was approximately 30 km away from him. They decided to start planting a quarter hectare of cabbage and marketing it aggressively in the local village with a target market of 5 000 households at that time. The venture was successful and grew to twenty hectares. As the demand grew, Phophi expanded by renting another 100 ha on nearby private land when Auwke Jongbloed introduced him to potato production.

Phophi started potato production in earnest in 2010 on a small scale of 5 ha, renting machinery from his mentor, Auwke. He grew from strength to strength and required more land for crop rotation. A successful application to the Department of Rural Development enabled Phophi to lease the farm in Vivo where he has been farming with potatoes for the last six years.

Phophi joined the Potatoes South Africa Enterprise Development Programme, starting out with 5 ha under potato production and has now expanded to 30 hectares under irrigation.

Following a four-year rotation cycle, Phophi alternates his potatoes with animal feed and maize. He also has a breeding stock of 100 Bonsmaras. Having heavy soil with a high percentage calcium which is an advantage, but which is highly deficient in phosphorous which have to be augmented before planting, Phophi has soil analysis done every time before planting. As erosion is a problem in the area, Phophi builds contours to protect his soil.

Phophi buys only certified seed and plants mostly Mondial. His fertiliser programme is based on the soil analysis and recommendations from the laboratory. All his potato fields are under centre pivot irrigation. Usually the early crop is planted in February and the late crop in June/July.

Phophi is vigilant against pests and diseases by inspecting his fields on a daily basis. He says: “The leaves are the factory and potatoes rely on the leaves for photosynthesis especially during the bulking stage. Once you lose your leaves to a disease or a pest, you may lose your crop. That is why it is important to treat your seed for preventative purposes and you need to control your soil and air borne diseases.”

To Phophi, yield is the key to success. He aims for 50 tons per hectare as a benchmark on Mondials, but sometimes he harvests 55 tons. The bulk of the potatoes produced by Phophi is sold to Mozambican buyers unwashed in 10 kg bags.

He recently developed the branding of his own bags with information in both English and Portuguese, and in three colours for the various classes. What is key to marketing is customer satisfaction. Phophi understands the needs of his target market and explains that unwashed potatoes have a longer shelf life than washed potatoes. He says: “When you wash potatoes then you compromise on shelf life, whereas the latter is a requirement of the Mozambican buyers”.

Keeping in mind that he is also producing other crops, Phophi employs 12 permanent labourers and an average of 60 seasonal workers when it is potato harvesting time, packing between 10 000 and 11 000 bags per day.

Phophi stays abreast of the latest information on potatoes and eagerly increases his knowledge by reading articles, attending courses presented by Potatoes SA and the Transformation Symposium as well as attending workshops presented by fertiliser and chemical companies. Articles on technical production, marketing and finance in CHIPS magazine is one of his sources of expanding his knowledge and he is grateful to still be on the Potatoes SA Enterprise Development Programme. As the farm is reliant on underground water which is a limited resource, making better use of water optimisation is an area in which Phophi would like to see more research done.

Phophi ascribes his success to the fact that, firstly by increasing his yield and secondly by the ability to source and access information and to learn from others. He says that how you sell and price your product is very important as well as the relations with various stakeholders in the industry. Phophi says: "In comparison to my peers I'd say that I have seen many who have started and failed on account of farming as a second option, not as the main source of your income. You want your livelihood to come out of it and you must make it work, that propels one to succeed."

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