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Poultry sector hatching a jobs master plan

WORK done to reverse the decimation of the local poultry sector, brought about by illicit and immoral dumping of imported poultry products, has successfully managed to turn the tide on the massive quantity of poultry that we import into South Africa.

There has been an overall decline in the last two years of imports, but there are warnings, as borders open post the Covid-19 lockdown and the restriction of movement is relaxed, of an influx of stockpiled poultry from overseas. Such an avalanche of cheap poultry cuts will set back the small gains we have made over the last few years.

The poultry sector is the largest contributor to the agricultural sector overall, taking into account that poultry producers purchase almost half of all the maize and soya produced here in South Africa. Local chickens eat local grain – that is an intrinsic part of the sector's value chain.

The implementation of the Poultry Master Plan, put together with inputs from government, industry stakeholders and organised labour, includes a target of 5 000 new jobs by 2023. These will be created through investment by producers into the sector to the tune of R1.5 billion (of which R1bn has already been allocated).

This kind of investment into industry infrastructure and equipment will enable the sector to increase its production by 10 percent over the next few years and was pledged in return for the government's review and increase in import tariffs in March this year. Higher tariffs assist in deterring and curbing the massive quantities of imported poultry products. The sector has applied for the renewal of these anti-dumping tariffs against some EU countries and are considering applying to add four more plus Brazil.

However, the key to sustaining higher production levels will be to drive higher demand from consumers and even from the corporate and government sectors. There is a suggestion on the table that poultry should be on the government's list of items designated for mandatory local sourcing for consumption in hospitals and prisons, for example.

The work being done in a number of sectors in finalising, signing and implementing sectoral master plans is critical in the overall strategy for the support of local industries including clothing, textiles, footwear and leather, the automotive sector, as well as poultry. The proof of our commitment to the

success of these plans will, of course, be in the implementation and this requires effort from all parties. In the case of the poultry sector, this includes retailers, whose resistance to using smaller-scale, emerging black poultry producers makes the barriers to entry too high for most. We can also add wholesalers to this, as they are often suppliers of imported products into the spaza shops, which have a massive penetration into the township market.

A further spend of R1.7bn has been earmarked for the establishment of 50 commercial-scale farms, and we hope that many of the existing small farmers will be able to scale-up their current operations to fall into this bracket.

There are many reasons why we should be buying only locally produced poultry products, and these include tracing, in the event that any products become contaminated.

Imported chicken is still permitted to show as many as nine possible countries of origin, whereas locally produced packs must adhere to stringent labelling requirements which allows for tracing back to the production plant.

Poultry, specifically chicken, is an important protein staple in the South African diet and its safety, price and availability must be protected. By managing our local poultry sector and allowing it to grow we can do this at the same time as creating muchneeded new jobs.

Vusi Mahlasela's song Silang Mabele talks about the need to grind the maize and milk the cows as the sun sets, as the children are going hungry.

The same applies to this sector, we must nurture it, grow it and retain jobs across the value chain, otherwise entire households will go hungry. And without existing jobs and the creation of new ones, they will stay hungry.

Eustace Mashimbye