

# Communal solution

A programme set up to help small-scale wool growers in South Africa is providing a significant boost to the country's wool production. **Ona Viljoen** reports.

A development programme launched by the South African National Wool Growers Association (NWGA) in the communal farming areas of the Eastern Cape in 1997 has resulted in a 20 times increase in wool produced in these areas and has helped expand South Africa's overall production, NWGA general manager Leon de Beer has told *Twist*.

The communal areas of the Eastern Cape, formerly known as the Transkei (the birthplace of the late president Nelson Mandela) and the Ciskei, were under the apartheid regime granted the status of 'self-governing territories within the Republic of South Africa'. Under the post-apartheid government, they became part of the Eastern Cape province.

However, apartheid policies, economic failure and corruption meant that very little economic and infrastructural

development took place in these territories, which still have some of the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the country.

The communal areas are home to a large number of small-scale farmers running small flocks – often as few as five sheep – on communal farming land. Communal land is owned by the community (farmers have no title deeds) and customary law regulates the rights to use thereof. Some parts of these regions are fairly remote and difficult to access due to poor roads and the difficult terrain.

Because most individual clips were small, farmers did not pay much attention to the quality or preparation of their wool for the market and mostly traded through the informal market by selling to traders who travelled around in the area and paid them a pittance for their wool.

To assist these farmers, the NWGA launched its programme aimed at improving the quality and quantity of the wool produced, as well as providing access to the formal wool market. This would enable them to reap the benefits of the higher wool prices that this market attracts.

The first step was to establish wool growers associations in the various districts so that producers could organise to shear, prepare and market their wool collectively.

Secondly, infrastructure development was undertaken, building new or upgrading existing shearing sheds in each district, providing the farmers with proper facilities.

The third step was to provide training in breeding, farm management, shearing, wool classing and mentorship.



One of the new shearing sheds built to serve its community.



Leon de Beer, the NWGA general manager.



By harvesting their wool at the same time, the farmers were able to collectively sort, prepare and pack their wool according to standards laid down by the Code of Practice for Clip Preparation, instead of selling small quantities of unsorted wool.

It soon became apparent that the genetics of the sheep in the region also required attention to improve not only the quality and quantity of the clip but also the flocks' reproductive ability. Field and flock management therefore also needed to be looked at. This resulted in the Genetic Improvement Programme, better known as the 'Ram Project'.

The NWGA reached an agreement with the departments of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; and Rural Development and Land Reform, according to which funds would be made available to the NWGA for annually removing 3,000 inferior owner-bred rams from the communal areas and replacing them with 3,000 genetically superior Merino rams.

The NWGA concluded contracts with breeders from two Group Breeding Schemes to supply 3,000 rams annually, subject to specific conditions, such as that the NWGA would appoint its own independent ram selectors. This scheme was launched during 2002/03.

Since then, 43,000 rams have been introduced, resulting in a huge improvement in the genetic material. "The volume and the quality of wool produced did improve dramatically, resulting in much higher incomes for these communities," says De Beer.

When the programme was launched in 1997/98, around 220,000 kg of wool was sold via the formal market (wool auctions), earning these producers R1.5 million. By the 2015/16 season the figure had risen to 4.46 million kg, according to statistics from Cape Wools. This represented 10% of the national clip, generating an income of R233.6 million for those communities.

At the start of the programme, prices for wool from the communal areas were around 50% of the national average. This has since increased to 68% of the national average because of the better quality.

The number of wool growers associations has increased from an initial 846 to 1,378, which indicates that more communities are now earning an income from wool. The wool producers of



Communal wool producers sorting their wool in preparation for the market.

the communal regions also enjoy full NWGA membership.

"The programme has had a huge socio-economic impact on these communities, radically reducing poverty," says De Beer. "An independent survey conducted in 2014/15 showed, among other poverty indicators, that the number of children going to bed hungry had

fallen from 40% to 24% since 2004, while the number of parents who had to borrow money for school fees decreased from 77% to 48%."

He adds: "Our vision years ago that the communal regions held the potential to grow our industry is being realised and we will continue to further grow and develop these areas." 🐑

## South African wool production update

Despite drought conditions in many parts of the region, Southern Africa's wool production for the 2015/16 season, at 49.7 million kg (mkg), was virtually unchanged compared with the previous season.

The production figure includes wool produced in the Kingdom of Lesotho (5.7 mkg), a small, mountainous country surrounded by South Africa. Lesotho's wool is sold in South Africa.

The highest annual production over the past 10 years – 50.5 mkg – was reached in 2013/14 and it has since remained at around this level, notwithstanding escalating stock theft levels and increases in predator populations, such as jackal and caracal.

Wool price increases, boosted by the weak rand, are encouraging farmers to continue producing wool. The average Cape Wools Merino Indicator for 2015/16 was 24% above the average for 2014/15.

An analysis of the fibre diameter for 2015/16 shows that the clip has become slightly finer, with the average for the total clip, including non-Merino wool, tested being 19.8 microns, compared with 20.2 microns in 2014/15. The largest volume of wool tested fell within the 19–21.5 micron range.

Over 95% of the South African clip is exported in greasy form, with China the largest importer, accounting for 64% of the total value of exports last season. The Czech Republic is the second largest importer, followed by Italy, India and Germany.