



By Gerhard Scholtemeijer, chairperson of the Protein Research Foundation

## – a burning issue in the oilseeds industry

**T**he importance of the South African oilseeds industry to man and beast can hardly be overestimated. Yet, in the past (and currently) it wasn't a priority, despite the currency outflow from South Africa annually amounting to billions.

Traditionally South Africa was mainly a maize-producing country, specifically in the summer rainfall areas. This was backed by sunflower. In the winter rainfall region wheat was the primary agricultural product in the Western Cape, supplemented by large volumes of wheat from the Free State and parts of the Highveld.

Prior to 1994 no vegetable protein for animal feed or edible oil was produced in the Western Cape, whereas sunflower was traditionally utilised as edible oil and the major source of vegetable protein for animal use. Fishmeal was in high demand due to its nutritional quality and sufficient quantities were available until the mid 1970s.

The two oldest oilseeds industries in South Africa are groundnuts and sunflower. The newcomers making a significant contribution are soya beans and canola.

### Wheat lost its lustre

When a natural disaster such as the heat and drought of 2015/16 occurs, producers tend to scrutinise every crop. It has a major effect on continuous crop cultivation. Profitability that depends mainly on yield, is vital for, among others, crop financing during the next year.

In the summer rainfall region maize and sunflower are reliable stalwarts, while wheat has lost its lustre, especially in the summer rainfall region. In the preface to the previous edition of *Oilseeds Focus*, Andries Theron spoke in detail regarding the position of wheat in the Western Cape.

Different scenarios exist with regard to

the four most important oilseeds, namely sunflower, groundnuts, soybeans and canola.

Yield undoubtedly is the biggest issue in oilseeds production. Compared to the maize industry where yield per hectare has multiplied during the past 30 to 40 years, sunflower yields kept on plodding ahead and only a few research projects gave marginal attention to higher yields.

### Sunflower research

Research on sunflower naturally received attention over the past forty years, but unfortunately it was fairly directionless. The quality of sunflower oil and the protein in sunflower oilcake seldom turned out to be the objective of purposeful research. Over the years we were able to control diseases and insects, except in the case of *Sclerotinia*, which is still causing problems internationally with little progress in combating it.

The latest crop estimate for 2015/16 shows that 617 000ha were planted with an expected yield of 622 000 tons. The average yield therefore is approximately one ton per hectare, which isn't uncommon in dry years.

The number of hectares will probably be adjusted upwards because, on the one hand, producers planted less maize and soya beans due to late rainfall. On the other hand the price of up to R7 500/ton saw the planting season for sunflower stretched until the typical "fortieth" of January. Just keep in mind that the highest average yield of 1,55t/ha the past 40 years was achieved in 2008.

### Groundnuts

Groundnuts are aimed mainly at the human food market and never contributed to the edible oil market or protein source for animal consumption. A flourishing groundnut industry with special status as

an exporter of quality product, has however collapsed into a struggling industry with no international status.

The groundnut industry is working on a turnaround strategy, but was dealt a blow by the current drought. According to the latest crop estimate the area under groundnuts decreased to 24 000ha with an estimated yield of 29 600 tons. The status of the industry is obvious considering that in 1973/74 364 000ha yielded 384 000 tons.

### The soya industry

Although the soya bean industry has been in production since the 1970s and earlier, it only gained true momentum in 1998. Total production in 1973 was 20 000 tons. The first year that marked production of more than a million tons was in 2015 on 687 300ha, which represents an average of approximately 1,52t/ha. The 2t/ha mark was exceeded only once in 2009 with an average of 2,17t/ha.

Despite the severe heat and drought, the latest production estimates indicate that 535 000ha of soya beans were planted with an expected yield of 768 000 tons.

### The canola industry

Canola is the Western Cape's contribution to the edible oils market and a protein source for animal feed. Although the industry only truly came into being in 1994, it grew dramatically to a high of 121 000 tons on 95 000ha in 2014. The average yield per hectare is also the most limiting factor in canola production.

South Africa is still experiencing a shortage of protein for animal consumption and of edible oils for human consumption. Oilseeds (excluding groundnuts) can be grown successfully over the next few years, notwithstanding the drought. However, higher yields, especially in respect of soya beans and canola, will require dedicated attention. 🌱