



Transforming sunflower production sustainably

By Aron Kole, managing director, FarmSol Holdings

The Russia-Ukraine war has had a major impact on the local farming industry, with the cost of fertilisers and fuel increasing drastically since the start of the conflict. Disruptions in global food supply chains and the skyrocketing price of sunflower oil further reflect the pressure experienced over the past months.

At farm level, sunflower seed production plays an important role as an ideal crop within the grain farmer crop production and crop rotation system, especially in the warmer and drier areas of the Free State, North West and Limpopo. Sunflower seeds are also an important food source in South Africa – the seeds are pressed and crushed for their oil, which is primarily used as cooking oil in many local households.

The extraction process of oil from seed results in sunflower meal, or sunflower oilcake, which is a valuable by-product in the feed industry. It is a powerful and excellent protein source used in the formulation of livestock feed. Among many others, niche sunflower oil use includes being used as sunflower fat spread or margarine, and it is also an important ingredient in skincare, acting as an emollient agent in cosmetic products.

Dwindling oil supply

Although the country produces 70% of sunflower oil and only imports 30% to meet demand, many South Africans are starting to see the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on their daily food

baskets as the price of cooking oil soars. Ukraine is the largest exporter of sunflower oil in the world and with fears of a decrease in sunflower oil stock levels around the world, some South African retailers have started rationing the sale of cooking oil by limiting the number of cooking oil bottles consumers can buy.

According to the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), local sunflower production has shown virtually no growth over the past two decades. Sunflower yields have increased by only 1% compared to 2,5% for maize, while sunflower oil content has been decreasing in the same period.

According to Peter Lovelace, CEO of Central Edible Oils (CEOCO), they realised around 40% oil with the sunflower intake during the 2010/11 seasons. Lately, however, the oil percentages of the sunflowers delivered to the company's oil mill in Boksburg have declined to as little as 35%.

Exploring new opportunities

With sunflower yields almost having reached their ceiling, an opportunity exists to increase the overall oil content of sunflowers, as well as boost the amount of sunflower oil that can be supplied to the local market as part of reducing reliance on imports.

In addition, multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborations are crucial to complete the entire value chain from farm to shelf and, most importantly, to link emerging farmers to valuable markets to

supply their produce, thus contributing to poverty alleviation, better incomes and improved food security.

In this regard, FarmSol Holdings, in partnership with Siqalo Foods, CEOCO, Unigrain and the Oil and Protein Seed Development Trust, started a project in the 2021/22 season aimed at supporting and enabling a group of emerging farmers participating under the FarmSol Emerging Grower Programme, to produce sunflower seed using high oil content cultivars.

Through this initiative, participating emerging farmers are rewarded with a SAFEX price premium for sunflower oil content exceeding 40% on delivery to CEOCO. The sunflower oil, once extracted at the CEOCO crushing plant in Boksburg, is supplied to Siqalo Foods. It is then used as part of the manufacturing of famous household brands such as Rama, Stork and Rondo.

FarmSol aims to continue playing a crucial role in farmer development, alongside industry partners, by building a strong agricultural sector in South Africa. Crucially, the challenges in agricultural transformation do not always relate to producers or the market, but often involve a lack of connecting these two with one another. 🌱

For any enquiries, contact FarmSol Holdings at 011 480 8592 or visit www.farmsol.co.za.