Emerging farmer took the bull by the horns

NOMI MOKATI

IN 1984, Gift Mafuleka tended to his grand’father's livestock on a small farm holding in Empangeni, KwaZulu-Natal.

At 13 the youngster closely watched his father, Thembeka Mafuleka, ploughing their small piece of land. Biyela was a worker at a sugar cane factory by day, Sub-sistence farming was to feed his family.

Mafuleka's love for farming was never influenced by the "boere" farmers who drove their cars along the dusty stretch of the road leading to their farm.

"Not at all," he recalled.

He grew up surrounded by English farmers who had acquired land during the British colony era in what was then Port Natal.

Today the 33-year-old father of two is a budding emergent farmer who has been lauded and awarded for producing more than 500 tons of grain last year and recently for producing more than 1 500 tons of grain. His clients and strategic partners include frozen vegetable powerhouse McCain, for whom he produces peas and sweet corn.

"I went into commercial farming after seeing how my grandfather struggled back then. For instance, he knew that he had to spray his crops but couldn’t afford the necessary equipment," he said. "As I grew up, I knew I wanted to farm and make money out of it. I later learnt that the appropriate term for this was commercial farming."

After completing his Mixed Farming diploma at the Tshwane University of Technology and his Bachelor of Technology majoring in crop production, Mafuleka is the proud owner of the Mphewe Siallama farm in Rayton.

The 545-hectare farm, to those in the know, would be considered a micro, small, medium enterprise, producing mealies, green peas, cabbages and grain crops that range from soya beans and maize. About 200 of the 340 hectares is for grazing.

The farm has a staff complimentary of 12 people including Mafuleka who resides on the farm full time, while the rest of the staff have modern dormitories.

Ask anyone, especially his mentor Tim Hedges, and you’d understand why many regard Mafuleka as a man of zeal and strong character.

While the government struggles with its land reform systems, Mafuleka was one of the few black farmers that took initiative. He explained how he approached the government when he learnt that the farm was being sold.

At the time in 2009, he worked as an assistant farming manager for McCain.

"The farm initially belonged to a private owner and was leased by McCain for 25 years. When it was up for sale I alerted the government about this and convinced them that I wanted to work on it."

And he was able to do so by applying for funding through the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform’s Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy. The programme works on a pro rata basis. Mafuleka has leased the farm for five years.

Through his mutual relationship with McCain, he then acquired equipment from the company which he in turn pays McCain back in crops.

McCain also assists Mphewe Siallama with its payroll systems. And while many young people have been drawn to farming over the past few years, Mafuleka maintains it is not all about the "boere-look" or a large bank balance.

Mafuleka says perception is rife that farming is lucrative - but it is a necessity. "Farming is different from any other business because it is more like a family activity. As the head of the house you need to oversee the finances, kids, make key decisions," he said.

"If you can’t manage your family you certainly won’t manage farming. When you’re here you look at feeding the nation at your cost. We are people who depend on the weather to make a living."

His weakest point is delegating duties, as he prefers being hands on.

Mafuleka’s sentiments on land acquisitions was that commercial farms lacked the appropriate skills.

"Experience is everything. Government provides many other things except natural resources. One struggles to gain (access) to water. For example, farms with good water and soil are never sold by private individuals. They are scarce," he said, explaining why many emergent farmers failed. "Government therefore has no option but to buy marginal farms."

He also said the lack of many black commercial farmers was reminiscent of government’s failure to plan properly and adopt proper training methods.

On future prospects Mafuleka said he had no intention of buying a farm anytime soon – but would continue with his lease.

"It’s a draining process involving the Land Bank. We’re still growing and with the uncertainties surrounding land reform it is just too risky," he added.

Mafuleka said he found the strength to run the farm came out of knowing he had to pay his workers.

"We all need each other to survive."

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