



## **Agricultural Writers SA North**

### **PRESS RELEASE: Hard work and excellence awarded.**

**18 October 2024**

Agricultural Writers SA North named its regional candidates on 18 October during its awards evening in Pretoria. The candidates were nominated by Agricultural Writers SA North members in the sections for Farmer of the Year, Agriculturist of the Year, and New Entrant to Commercial Agriculture. These provincial candidates, together with candidates from the !Xhariep region (Western, Eastern and Northern Cape) will now be adjudicated by an independent panel of judges. The national Agricultural Writers SA awards event will be presented on 15 November in Gauteng where the overall winner in each category will be announced.

The Agricultural Writers SA North event's main sponsors were New Holland Agriculture, NWK, and Rijk Zwaan, supported by Van Loveren and the South African Pork Producers Organisation (SAPPO).

Lindi Botha, chairperson of Agricultural Writers SA North, said during the event that South African farmers prove their mettle year after year, uplifting rural economies, creating jobs, and ensuring food security for millions across the globe. "We must recognise the dedication and perseverance that keeps our food systems strong—this sector should never be taken for granted. We never want to be in a situation where we only realise what we had until after we have lost it."

"Despite significant challenges like rising input costs, logistics issues, and trade barriers, our farmers continue to provide high-quality, affordable food that remains widely available. Their resilience, as demonstrated by this year's award recipients, is the backbone of our nation's food security."

She congratulated the finalists, saying they were the embodiment of passion, dedication, and determination.

This year's Agricultural Writers SA North award recipients are:

#### **AGRICULTURIST OF THE YEAR**

This year's focus is on researchers in the Agriculturist of the Year section, and the two award recipients are Stephan De Groot (Free State) - nominated by Magda du Toit, and Prof Driekie Fourie, also nominated by Magda du Toit.

## **FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Jozeph du Plessis (Northwest) – nominated by Magda du Toit, Egon Zunckel (KwaZulu-Natal) – nominated by Lloyd Phillips, and Michael Fysh (Gauteng) – nominated by Robyn Joubert.

## **NEW ENTRANT TO COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE**

The third division, New Entrant to Commercial Agriculture, produced one candidate from the region. The focus falls on farmers who have made the leap from subsistence farmer to small-scale farmer to a full-fledged commercial producer in the past ten years, have already achieved success on various levels and are continuing to show promise. Betty Nyambi (Gauteng) – nominated by Jennifer Booth is this year's regional finalist.

## **MORE ABOUT THE AGRICULTURAL WRITERS SA NORTH FINALISTS**

### **Free State Agriculturalist of the Year - Stephan De Groot**

Stephan de Groot is a native of a vineyard farm outside Stellenbosch. Here, his exposure to the agricultural environment sparked his interest in the industry.

In 2012, he obtained his MSc Agric Genetics (Plant Breeding) Laude. In the study, he focused on establishing a breeding programme where the genetic resistance to rust diseases is improved. Currently, he is busy with his PhD dissertation focusing on efficient nitrogen use in wheat.

For him, as a wheat breeder, it is important to keep abreast of the latest research on wheat improvement. As project leader for wheat at Syngenta Seeds in South Africa, he and his team of breeders are responsible for regularly releasing new wheat cultivars that will be an asset to the wheat producer. Since Stephan joined Sensako, now Syngenta Seeds, he has released 11 cultivars in total that have achieved commercial success.

Wheat is the second most important grain crop after maize in South Africa. Locally, the northern wheat production areas play a crucial role in wheat production because they account for 50% of the country's annual wheat production. It is estimated from SAGIS data that wheat cultivars released from the Sensako wheat breeding program for the northern production area account for 53% of the total wheat grain production of the area. This represents almost 550 000 tonnes with a current market value of R3.24 billion. This highlights the important role Stephan plays as a wheat researcher and breeder in the industry.

He has been involved in several international collaborative projects. One of the projects investigated the characterisation of local wheat cultivars' root growth capacity, and the team tried to measure the character trait and breed for it. He was also involved in a project testing wheat lines in Africa bred from parent lines bred from various wheat areas from across the planet.

Stephan is a member of the Wheat Forum and also a member of the South African Plant Breeders' Society and is married to Dr Gerida de Groot.

### **Gauteng Agriculturalist of the Year - Prof Driekie Fourie**

Armed with a passion for agricultural science and a PhD in Nematology from the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium, Prof Driekie Fourie has dedicated her career, which commenced in 1991 at the Agricultural Research Council's Grain Crops Institute, to studying nematodes and their impact on crop health. She is world-renowned for her knowledge of nematodes. She is widely recognised as the go-to person with regard to anything related to nematodes in the agricultural industry in South Africa. Prof Fourie's expertise and innovative research have made her a respected authority in the field.

In 2010 she continued her research on nematode ecology, host plant resistance and evaluation of eco-friendly IPM strategies to combat plant-parasitic nematodes at NWU (North-West University).

She has been honoured for her outstanding contributions in her field with multiple awards during her research career, including researcher of the year for the Unit for Environmental Sciences and Management at the NWU, best PhD thesis by the Protein Research Foundation, Agricultural Research Council's Medal for Excellence as a researcher, as well as various recognitions for best poster and oral presentations at Nematology-related congresses/symposia.

Her role at Syngenta offers her the opportunity to apply her knowledge in a practical manner to develop effective solutions that can help farmers protect their crops and increase agricultural productivity. "Working in industry allows me to bridge the gap between research and practical implementation, enabling me to make a tangible impact on sustainable agriculture."

### **North West Farmer of the Year: Jozeph du Plessis**

Jozeph du Plessis is no stranger to the grain and cotton industries. He lives on the farm Boskop near Schweizer Reneke and farms on several farms in the Schweizer Reneke and Migdol districts. As a child, Jozeph already showed great interest in farming and started working on the farm part-time during weekends and school holidays. Today, he is the fifth generation to continue the farming.

Three principles are decisive for him in his farming: a crop rotation system, attention to groundwater management and precision farming practices. Precision management forms the basis of precision farming and means that all aspects of farming are properly analysed.

They plant 3,000 ha of crops annually in an overlay and crop rotation system and have 2,900ha of natural pasture, while 1,500ha are overlaid to store moisture. The Santa Gertrudis stud herd, managed by his uncle Koos Lock and their son Abri, consists of 600 breeding cows. The two farming branches complement each other.

He is seen as one of the leading farmers in his area and also as an "early adopter" of new technology, which makes him one of the opinion makers in the grain and cotton industries. Jozeph was one of the first farmers to plant biotech crops in 1999. In 2011, he was the first farmer to plant soybeans in his area and in 2017, he was again the first farmer to start growing cotton in the district.

Joseph believes in being involved in his community. He serves on the management of several organisations, including a member of the Council of Cotton SA as well as chairman of the Cotton Producers Organisation. As a member of Grain SA, he acts as the representative of their region on the GSA Executive Board, and he was also the convener of the judging committee that annually assessed the entries of the Grain SA Grain Farmer of the Year for 17 years.

Joseph has already undertaken many tours abroad to see how producers use new technology, and which can be applied in South Africa.

He is married to Susna, a medical doctor, and they have three children, Elke (19) and twin sons Jaco and Martin (17).

### **KwaZulu-Natal Farmer of the Year: Egon Zunckel**

Egon Zunckel's life is a story of determination and innovation in the world of farming. Born in 1962 in Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal, Egon is a fourth-generation farmer, continuing a family legacy that began in 1845. After completing his schooling and serving two years in the army, Egon returned to the family farm in 1984, ready to take on the challenges that lay ahead.

The farm was precarious, burdened with debt and struggling to stay afloat. With his father unable to manage the farm due to health issues, Egon took over, armed with a 25-year loan from the land bank and a carry-over debt of R100 000 after the first season – an especially hefty sum for that time. Hard lessons and perseverance marked his early years. He sold the dairy operation, which he believed was dragging the farm down, and shifted his focus to beef cattle and cropping.

A significant turning point came 31 years ago when Egon discovered and began no-till farming. This method involves minimal soil disturbance and has greatly improved soil health and crop yields. Egon also adopted cover cropping, planting a mix of grasses, brassicas, and legumes to enhance soil health and provide forage for livestock. Over time, Zunckel Farms expanded from 700 hectares to almost 5000 hectares, achieving crop yields that often surpass industry norms.

Egon's commitment to sustainability and efficiency is evident throughout the operations. He provides employment and training opportunities for local residents, supports community initiatives, and mentors other farmers. Today, Egon farms alongside his sons, Tyson (36) and Carl (35), ensuring that Zunckel Farms remains a model of innovation and sustainability for future generations.

Egon is married to Gaynor. They have two sons and a daughter, who are all married, and six grandchildren.

### **Gauteng Farmer of the Year: Michael Fysh**

Located in Honingnestkrans near Pretoria, Riverside Piggeries is a 1 000 sow unit. Since 2003, when his dad's health deteriorated, Michael Fysh holds the reins of this family enterprise. Nowadays, the enterprise comprises *inter alia* of an abattoir, an on-site feed mill, and an on-site water purification plant. However, before his dad passed away, he inspired Michael to capitalise on the potential use of the excrements of their pigs.

Before he took over from his parents at the tender age of 23, Michael qualified himself as an IT engineer. That might explain why he is so at ease with change and new technologies. Subsequently, Michael pioneered an on-site biogas cum heat and power system. Due to paying school fees, he has learned to adapt and balance new technologies with practicality. Moreover, he has learnt to predict situations and manage risks. Nowadays, biogas production combined with solar power makes Riverside Piggeries, to a large extent, less dependent on electricity supplied by Eskom.

Despite the limitations of being situated in a peri-urban area, Michael fulfils a stewardship role in an unconventional way, including limiting carbon and methane emissions by using biogas production from pig manure to generate his own electricity.

Thanks to implementing top genetics and following industry best practices, Michael has excelled and been awarded much-coveted prizes on several occasions. Yet, he remains humble. As a board member of the South African Pork Producers' Organisation (SAPPO), he subscribes to taking part in industry matters, including mentoring projects.

Last but not least, he is acutely aware of the social responsibilities towards his workers and the impact that it has on their lives. Having been raised in a close-knit family, Michael's strong family values characterise the running and development of their enterprise as well as his outlook regarding strategic future developments.

#### **Gauteng new entrant to commercial farming: Betty Nyambi**

Betty Nyambi, owner of Sincobile Trading and Agriculture, has 20 years of agricultural employment experience, where she gained experience in various aspects of farm management and production.

When she was awarded a piggery by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Betty Nyambi knew little or nothing about pig farming. She refused to let that stop her, and through hard work and training, she became a competent pig farmer.

Nyambi grew up and attended school in Komatipoort, Mpumalanga, where her parents worked on land. She studied rural development and extension services at Tshwane University of Technology and qualified in 2003. The following year, she did an internship at the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD), whereafter she was appointed as a farmworker at Winterveld Citrus farm outside Pretoria.

Nyambi said she soon felt inspired to become a farmer and started applying for land through the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform. In 2014, she received a 173ha farm near Bronkhorstspuit. Her mind was set on vegetable farming but to her surprise, when she visited the farm, it had piggery infrastructure – old but still standing. In 2015, she started her piggery business with six Large White gestating sows.

In 2015, Nyambi attended a pig breeding course with the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and completed artificial insemination (AI) courses with Pig Improvement Company and Alzu Pig Genetics.

The results were soon apparent. In 2016, she was a runner-up in GDARD's Gauteng Female Entrepreneur of the Year competition and received 23 sows and a boar from the department.

She rents the farm from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform on a 30-year lease signed in April 2017. She continued growing sow numbers using AI and now has 130 sows and three boars on the farm. Since expanding the breeding herd and transitioning to a farrow-to-wean operation in 2021, Sincobile now sells weaner piglets to Swineline Pty (Ltd) in Cullinan for further growth.

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## MEDIA ENQUIRIES

Lindi Botha at email: [lindivr@gmail.com](mailto:lindivr@gmail.com)

More photographs are available on request.



From the left back: Jaco du Preez, Jaco Du Preez. Product & Marketing Specialist - Tractors at CNH in SA (New Holland); Egon Zunckel Farmer of the Year KwaZulu-Natal; Jozeph de Plessis, Farmer of the Year North West; Stephan de Groot Agriculturist of the Year, Free State; Michael Fysh Farmer of the Year Gauteng.

From the left front: Thys van Zyl. Managing Director Rijk Zwaan South Africa, Betty Nyambi New Entrant to Commercial Agriculture; Prof Driekie Fourie Agriculturist Gauteng; Johan Bezuidendout Group Manager Corporate Marketing and Communication · NWK Group, and Lindi Botha Agricultural Writers SA North chairperson.