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**ANNUAL BOKONE BOPHIRIMA FARMER SUPPORT
CONFERENCE SPARKS NEW IDEAS FOR CHANGE**

Hartebeespoort - New ideas to transform and steer agricultural extension and advisory services to greater heights in the North West Province were at the centre of deliberations during a week-long annual conference which ended last Friday, 23 February in Hartebeespoort Eagle Waters near Brits. The conference was the 10th to be hosted by the Department of Rural, Environment and Agricultural Development (READ) successively.

Held under the theme “*Digitalization of extension and advisory services for radical socio economic transformation*”, the conference stoutly deliberated on an urgent need for the Extension and Advisory Practitioners in the province to take advantage of technological devices at their disposal when rendering their services to the local farming community.

Agricultural extension play a crucial role in promoting the objectives of extension, such as increased agricultural productivity, increasing food security, improving rural livelihoods and promoting agriculture as an engine of pro-poor economic growth.

Over five hundred (500) delegates comprising Extension and Advisory Officers employed by the Department, renowned experts in the extension profession from institutions of higher learning, and from the National Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), Extension

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Technicians, Crop Technicians, Natural Resource Technicians, Value Chain officers as well as Research Institutes were part of this year's conference.

During the deliberations, delegates were urged to align their day to day activities to the Extension Recovery Plan (ERP) which is aimed at addressing the gaps identified in agricultural extension services and which will ultimately assist the province to meaningfully contribute towards achieving the 2030 National Development Plan targets.

Leading a high panel of discussions on digitalization of extension and advisory services, Professor Elliot Zwane of University of Limpopo reiterated that utilisation of technology in extension and advisory services was crucial as it would bring much needed change. "With employment of technology to your daily extension and advisory services as the theme of this year's conference says, you will achieve more and most importantly your services will significantly improve," Professor Zwane told delegates.

The same sentiments were shared by his counterpart from North West University, Professor Simon Sebatana Letsoalo. In his presentation Letsoalo said digitalisation has been a significant contributor to growth and socio-economic development in business sectors, countries and regions where they are well adopted and integrated. "The large adoption and integration of digitalisation has reduced transactions costs, it has improved services delivery, created new jobs generated new revenue and saved resources," Letsoalo indicated.

Delegates from this conference pledged their support to initiatives and resolutions of the conference which are aimed at growing further this important sector.

MEC Manketsi Tlhape assured the delegates that after this year's conference, things will be done differently. "I can assure you that when we go out from this conference, things will be done differently. Digitalization is the way to go, therefore our Extension and Advisory Officers have no choice but to utilize technological devices at their disposal to the fullest as discussed in the conference" she said.

Tlhape also cautioned farmers and delegates of the climate change. "Climate change has become a threat to the productivity and long-term sustainability of the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sector, particularly the household and smallholder producers. The adoption of smart agricultural practices is therefore of great importance."

She gave marching orders to Extension Officers of the department to address the ever changing needs of farmers in the province, maintain strong clientele support, provide sufficient specialist support to the sector and continue to address production efficiency factors.

In the spirit of saamtrek saamwerk, MEC Tlhape urged non-government organization to continue working with government and continue providing a cross sectorial perspective and to build a strong agricultural sector which will create more job opportunities for the people of Bokone Bophirima.

Cooperatives and individual farmers involved in agricultural activities in Bojanala District were visited by delegates from the conference for expert advice and donations through an outreach programme.

Kgema-Mamorule Cooperative in Bokfontein outside Brits town is one of the cooperatives which have benefited from this community outreach programmes by the department. The department donated working tools for their gardens as well as vegetables seeds.

The cooperative was established in 2015, it is specialising with food gardening and it has nine (09) full time workers with a number of volunteers from Community Work Programme, (CWP). Cooperative coordinator Glory Motlhala welcomed the gesture by the Department of READ.

“On behalf of our cooperative we welcome this assistance by the department. These garden tools will help us a lot to plough more and feed this community. This came at the right time and I want to thank MEC Manketsi Tlhape and her team. We are really grateful,” said jubilant Motlhala.

According to Motlhala, Kgema-Mamorule Cooperative often donates vegetables to underprivileged members of the community, home based care centres and crèches in Bokfontein area.

The agricultural sector is critical to rural development and contributes significantly to major initiative that alleviates poverty.

Photos: IMG 8776: MEC Manketsi Tlhape addressing community of Makapanstad in Bojanala District before handing over of livestock infrastructure to emerging livestock farmers.

IMG 7846: Extension Officers from Rural Environment and Agricultural Development Department planting seedlings that were donated by the Department to cooperatives and family households in Bokfontein informal settlements in Bojanala District.

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