

# Why SA's goat farmers must get down to business

Stakeholders in South Africa's goat value-chain are determined to grow their sector into a profitable and sustainable industry to benefit farmers and the economy. **Johan Steyn**, owner of Patriot Boer Goat Stud in the Eastern Cape, discusses how this can be achieved.

The views expressed in our weekly opinion piece do not necessarily reflect those of *Farmer's Weekly*.

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“ South Africa's goat industry can expect many exciting and interesting future developments. While the establishment of developing farmers in South Africa is a government priority, I believe the manner in which government is currently attempting to achieve this objective is not relevant to the challenges facing our goat industry.

I have been involved in the industry for 26 years, and currently produce and export goats to several countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. I suspect that the South African goat industry does not appreciate how great the local and international demand for live goats is. This demand is driven partly by cultural practices, but, increasingly, it can be attributed to the health characteristics of goat meat. South Africa's steadily urbanising population is demanding that goat meat become more readily available in supermarkets and butcheries, and there are also many foreigners living in the country who enjoy eating goat meat. Restaurants in our main cities are increasingly sourcing goat meat to cater for these foreigners' preferences.

These are just a few of the many opportunities available to our industry.

To capitalise on these potential opportunities, the goat industry has to realise that every farming operation has to be run as a business. If we want to convert South Africa's many subsistence-type farming operations into sustainable income-generating enterprise, they must be commercialised so that all our goat farmers can aim to produce the maximum kilograms of meat per hectare in the shortest possible timeframe, with the lowest input costs. This also needs to be done sustainably.

There is simply no other way that a commercial goat farming operation can be profitable.

## THE PROBLEM WITH THE INDUSTRY

South Africa has a largely pastoral approach to goat farming. To establish emerging farmers, government provides each aspiring farmer with a small piece of non-economically viable land, and a nuclear flock of 10 to 20 animals. The farmer is

then expected to generate a sustainable income. This is unrealistic; even a flock of 20 female Boer goats managed under the best conditions with best practices and a 150% kidding rate/season will not be enough to produce a sustainable, liveable income for the farmer.

Government's and industry stakeholders' approach to goat farming must change from this pastoral/communal mindset to a commercial mindset. We should aim for a smaller number of sustainable commercial operations on economically viable farm units that are managed as businesses, rather than many non-economically viable subsistence farmers. We should also use acceptable animal husbandry practices to improve the quality and quantity of the animals that we produce.

## 'FORWARD PLANNING IS ESSENTIAL IN A COMMERCIAL GOAT FARMING OPERATION'

I recently received an enquiry from a buyer in the Middle East who wanted to procure 10 000 slaughter goats a month. This is by no means the only enquiry I've received for such large numbers of goats. However, at the moment, our goat industry cannot supply this international market, as we are not even able to consistently satisfy local demand.

## COMMERCIALISING FARMERS

To move from pastoral to commercial goat production, a number of requirements must be considered. First, as mentioned above, producers must own economically viable farms. This implies that we need to move away from communal grazing systems to a farming system in which each owner can farm sustainably and independently. Besides the economic benefits, this will allow for the implementation of planned breeding seasons with selective stock, thereby improving the quality of goats.

The first step to accomplishing this is to accept that not everyone can farm. A good