





Farmers sample what Libya offers

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CHARL Senekal holds up a clod of Libyan soil and lets it trickle through his fingers. Behind him endless rows of neglected olive trees stretch into the distance. "This place is easy to fix," says the jovial barrel-chested farmer. "We could turn it into a paradise."

Senekal is among a group of South African farmers who visited Libya last week to inspect collapsed state farms that the government wants revived through private sector partnerships to make the oil-rich country less dependant on food imports.

An estimated 75% of Libya's food is imported, and SA's farmers — with their reputation for being expert commercial producers under tough farming conditions — could become a catalyst in helping the country become self-sufficient.

The scale of unrealised agricultural potential on existing projects alone is staggering. The olive estate at Khadra, east of Tripoli, has 5,7-million trees planted on 40000ha, which is 10 times bigger than the largest olive farms in SA. The group also inspected a dairy complex capable of handling 3500 milk cows (in SA a dairy farmer with 100 cows is considered large) and a poultry production centre that can slaughter 3000 birds an hour.

This is just a sample of what's on offer. Agricultural consultants in Tripoli say there are several more giant state-owned olive estates and dairy, beef and poultry production centres that have either collapsed or are in terminal decline. This is in addition to about 500000ha of unused good quality grazing land and large fertile swathes with established irrigation infrastructure not being farmed, including a 50000ha tract at Souf Ejino, 350km south of Tripoli.

At the Khadra olive estate visited by the South African farmers, the trees were planted in the 1930s at 20m intervals, leaving plenty of room for other crops to be grown commercially between the rows. A few subsistence patches dotting the hills are the only sign of agricultural activity now. Despite being connected to Libya's Great Man Made River — arguably the world's largest irrigation project that transports water from giant aquifers in the Sahara to the country's more populated northern coastal strip through a 5000km pipeline — yields from the well established trees plummeted after the estate was turned into a state farm.

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With a drip irrigation system and scientific application of fertiliser, yields could easily be doubled, say the farmers. This, together with generous incentive proposals under discussion that include free electricity, land and water, interest-free loans and diesel prices as low as 60c/l, make farming in Libya a very attractive proposition, they say.

“At current electricity prices it would cost R3m-R4m a month to irrigate this estate in SA,” says Senekal. The olives on the neglected trees alone are worth R30m, which means the project would become an immediate earner.

“The easiest thing to sell is a higher net profit,” he says. “There will be major South African interest in this.”

More investment would be needed before the dairy yielded any return, especially in establishing new farms to supply thousands of cows with a steady supply of fodder, the farmers say. But the complex’s main infrastructure was largely intact, and with much higher producer prices paid in Libya for dairy products than in SA, profits are likely to be far higher. “In two weeks I would draw my first milk here,” says livestock and maize farmer Andrei Botha, who heads the Gauteng branch of farmers union AgriSA. “We could make this a model farm.”

The group met Libyan leaders last week to discuss the involvement of South African farmers in reviving the state farms. AgriSA deputy president Theo de Jager, who heads the delegation, described the meeting as “positive”. The farmers were promised favourable terms and their investments would be protected under an agreement ratified by the South African government.

De Jager says more than 1000 farmers had signed up to be part of the drive to expand throughout Africa. “South African farmers have reached a breaking point with regards to the availability of land because our government wants to transfer one in every four farms in five years as part of its land reform programme,” he says. But he warns that hurdles remain. He is worried about Libya’s record in enforcing contracts with foreign companies, and the lack of social support networks. “There’s a lot of money to be made for someone with balls,” he says.

Senekal, who owns a big sugar-cane and game farm in KwaZulu- Natal with a turnover of R160m a year, says the chaotic way land reforms are being implemented in SA prompted him to explore opportunities in Libya.

He has hosted Jacob Zuma several times on his farm before he became president and says he supports land reform but disputes the validity of a land claim on his farm. “I sold 30% of some of my cane land to my workers at a third of market value and I gave 250000 people drinking water, but they (the Land Claims Commission) say it doesn’t count,” he says. “A lot of big farmers like us are worried about how things are going in SA.”

But Botha emphasised the mission should not be seen as “another Groot Trek. This is not running away — it is a calculated process of helping Africa take up its rightful place in the world. All over Africa the message we get is: we are looking for South African farmers, which is incredibly important

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