

SA farmers may head to Libya

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Somerset West - A new land deal allowing South African farmers to produce livestock, milk and fruit in Libya has been put on hold pending the finalisation of an investment protection agreement between the two countries.

Theo de Jager, Deputy President of South Africa's largest farmers' union Agri SA said a protection agreement between the two countries had been drafted.

"We were happy with the opportunities we were offered in Libya, but the problem now is that the investment protection agreement between the South African and Libyan governments has not been ratified, so we are not fully protected if we go there," Theo de Jager, Deputy President of farmers union Agri SA said on Thursday.

He said Libya had offered South African farmers a number of agricultural opportunities, including a 40 000 hectare olive farm and a large fully equipped dairy farm with about 3 600 dairy cattle. Countries are offering the opportunities in return for investment and farming expertise.

"The infrastructure is in place, but perhaps because of a lack of know-how in farming they haven't been able to utilise and make those ventures profitable," De Jager told Reuters on the sidelines of an agriculture conference.

South African farmers have attracted widespread interest across the continent as other countries try to tap into their expertise to boost food production and ensure food security.

Africa's biggest economy also has one of the continent's best-developed agriculture sectors and is a top producer of maize, wheat and livestock.

"We're talking to people in Sudan, Sierra Leone, Malawi and there's also quite a lot of interest from Angola at the moment but any plans to go to those countries will primarily take into account the existence of (investment) protection agreements," De Jager said.

South African agriculture minister Tina Joemat-Pettersson earlier warned farmers to only venture into regions where bilateral agreements were in place between countries.

"I would encourage you to go only to those countries where country-to-country agreements are in place because those are safer," she told the conference.

Agri SA signed a deal with the Congo Republic last year that will give South African farmers access to up to 10 million hectares of farmland in the central African country.

The deal, potentially one of the largest land agreements on the continent and part of Congo's plan to improve food security, will allow South African farmers to lease land for maize, soy beans, poultry and dairy cattle among other produce.

De Jager said the union was in the process of selecting farmers to take up the offer.

"There were about 1 700 farmers who expressed an interest, so we're now in the process of selecting those farmers who will go there," he said.

- Reuters