

Huge losses at farms

Fire damage to KZN plantations during unrest estimated at R656 mln

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A “staggering” 1 772 hectares of plantation was lost due to fires that had been deliberately started during July’s civil unrest in KwaZulu-Natal.

The total direct and indirect losses suffered by the forestry sector is estimated to be around R656 million. This is according to research done by the KwaZulu-Natal Agricultural Union (Kwanalu).

Speaking during an agricultural seminar this week on lessons learnt

from the unrest, chief executive of Kwanalu Sandy la Marque said during the unrest the organisation conducted real time research from 110 farm leaders to determine the extent of the damage to farms, rural towns and their surrounding communities. She said the figures were “staggering” and “concerning”.

“Every single commodity [sugar, dairy, poultry and bananas] was affected in one form or another.”

The biggest loss, according to La Marque, came from the value chain, which was also destabilised as a result

of the unrest.

She said one of the lessons learnt from the unrest was the importance of fact-checking information.

She said the lack of training and equipment for security members was something that needed to be rectified in the future.

Mechanical transport and resources like shotguns, rubber bullets and tear gas could have limited the scale of the destruction, said La Marque.

Roger de Billiot, from the Eston/Mid-Illovo Farm Watch, spoke about

how their security forces were overwhelmed by arsonists. He said they felt helpless. Communication between farming communities was essential, he added.

He said more training in dealing with riots and putting out fires was also needed for security personnel. “I personally believe it is essential for farmers in this country to own firearms. We don’t have to banish them, but we need to be trained and prepared,” he said.

Adrian Chaning-Pearce, a cane grower in Pongolo, said they lost about

42 hectares worth of plantation due to fire which borders the communal areas.

As a result of trucks not being able to enter the area, RCL Sugar Factory was closed for over a week, which affected a lot of farmers. “The entire community is built and survives around the sugar mill. The burnt cane could not be taken to the mill so the quality suffered. This means we [now] have rely on the mill remaining open in late December to get our crop in when the summer rains have arrived and the quality drops off,” he said.