

south africa

Pieter Lombard

Delmas

Mpumalanga, South Africa



Stewardship for a future on the farm

If you take a 45 kilometre drive east of Johannesburg, you will find a rural area encircling the community of Delmas, South Africa. It is here that Pieter Lombard, Manager of Agro Company – Morgan Beef, operates a 16,000 head cattle feedlot and field crop operation.

Lombard and his colleagues at the Cohenburg Farm, an affiliated family farm started by the Morgan family, have made stewardship a key element of their farm management practices. By adopting new technologies that have positive benefits for the land, Lombard hopes the natural ecology will flourish and provide a backdrop for a successful farm well into the future.

Over the past seven years the farm has changed from a system of mono-cropping corn to using rotational cropping as a means to generate income and renew the

land. A typical crop rotation includes maize, soybeans and sugar beans. “We changed to a rotational cropping system because the soybeans (a legume crop) put nitrogen back into the soil. It’s a good practice for building up the soil naturally. In addition, crop rotations help protect the ecology.”

“At Morgan Beef we buy our seed because it gives us improved yields,” say Lombard. While buying new seed every year can be more expensive than planting farm-saved seed, the benefits of growing “new technology”





management

results in a “better crop and healthier plants.” And that means more feed for the cattle and more saleable crops for the farm.

Lombard and his colleagues realise that to do a good job at farming they need to do their own on-farm research to find out what works the best for their farm. “We do a lot of research together with our seed suppliers,” says Lombard. “Each year we allocate a stretch of land for research on new cultivars and new products. The cultivars with the best performance over a period of two to three years will be our choice of cultivar to grow on our lands,” he says. By running test plots on the farm, Lombard can easily see the impact of new technologies such as Bt corn versus conventional corn where worm damage and resulting yield losses are evident.

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The farm plants herbicide-tolerant soybeans and Lombard says the farm especially likes to plant biotech soybeans in “problem fields” where weeds are a difficult

pest to combat. This new technology has freed up farm labour to work on other important aspects of operating the farm.

When it comes to biodiversity, the farm’s change in management practices, including rotational cropping, use of new seed varieties and appropriate use of crop protection products has caused a turnaround for the farm’s ecology. “Ten years ago we had lots of animals on the farm. There was a decline but now we see the trend reversing. Today, we have lots of birdlife on our dams and more animals have been spotted in the fields,” he says. And the farm protects the fish and animals that rely on the irrigation dams by protecting the soil from erosion (such as planting across a slope to maximise water catchment and avoid runoff) and by using minimal water when applying crop protection products to avoid spreading the product beyond the fields.

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The farm carefully evaluates its pesticide usage and applies insecticides and herbicides that are designed for specific problems. This way the wetlands, animals and plants are not adversely affected. In addition, by taking time to correctly calculate the correct concentration of fertilizer, the farm ensures that only as much nutrients as the plant can use is applied, further protecting the natural resources.

While Lombard believes in protecting the natural environment, he also understands the importance of improving productivity and generating a profit for the farm. “I grew up on a farm where crop protection products were unheard of. We had to manage weeds manually. This was a very tedious and time-consuming process. With crop protection products, we have improved labour productivity and enhanced protection of our crops,” he says.

The farm has also adopted advances in equipment. Today, the farm uses only one tractor where four or five tractors were once needed, resulting in lower fuel costs and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

For Lombard stewardship is critical to the future of his farm, and new technologies offered by the plant science industry are helping him grow his farm while rebuilding the soil and the ecology.