

On the right is Nkuliseni Leonard Mavhungu, manager of the Fort Hare Dairy Trust's farm just outside of Alice in the Eastern Cape



On **greener** pastures

by Fidelis Zvomuya

The Fort Hare Dairy Trust is flanked by a herd of 800 beautiful, well-kept dairy cows and a magnificent state-of-the-art cow shelter. This project has become a blue chip and the pride of the small university town of Alice in South Africa's Eastern Cape.

It is in this paradise that Nkuliseni Leonard Mavhungu prefers to stay and watch the grass grow. "In my view, cows turn grass into milk. The richer and more abundant the grass, the richer and more abundant the milk is going to be. And this is what I like most," he said.

"A healthy cow always gives you the best milk. Feeding them and making sure they are healthy, is the only medicine for a successful dairy production business," he said.

It starts with the pastures

“We use a combination of high-quality pasture, supplemental, stored and purchased feedstuffs. Optimising dry matter intake and maintaining normal rumen function is a priority we also monitor closely,” he said.

“Pastures,” he explained, “are the foundation of sustainable dairy production. We best maintain ours here by developing a grazing system or plan that conserves the soil and plant resources, while maximising productivity within the natural limits of the particular ecology of the farm.”

This knowledge, which he is now proud to share with anyone in South Africa, is a result of an extensive mentorship programme he went through with some white commercial farmers who are part of Amadlelo Agri, an empowerment company that manages the Fort Hare Dairy Trust.

The partnership

The trust was initiated from a partnership between 70 white commercial dairy farmers from the Tsitsikamma and Underberg areas through Amadlelo Agri and the University of Fort Hare. It has become a shining symbol of how successful land reform could be through the provision of skills training and resources.

“We met in 2004 and came to the conclusion that land empowerment is not purely the responsibility of the government,” said Amadlelo Agri chief executive, Jeff Every. “If land reform is to take place properly, white farmers have to play a role in providing training and resources. We have had all the privileges. We have to share what we know and what we have.”

The farmers signed on an empowerment company, Vuwa Investments, which was given a 35% stake in Amadlelo. They retained 49% of the shares and the rest was shared among the 600 workers of the 70 dairy farmers.

Solid support

“I met with the agricultural department of the University of Fort Hare to discuss our plan. The university offered to contribute research and scientific knowledge to the farm and donated R2 million towards the project. It also offered a piece of land outside town, which it owned by the department of agriculture,” Every said.

A further R5 million was received from Amadlelo and two amounts of R7,5 million in equity and R7,5 million credit from the Land Bank, were also obtained.

Hard work pays off

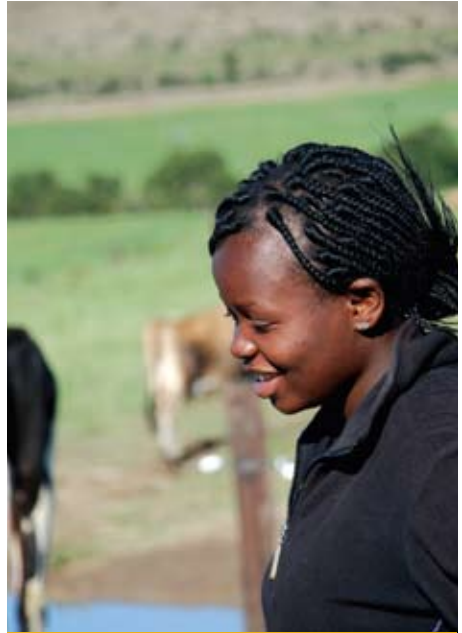
When Mavhungu arrived at the farm in February 2007, it was a bush thriving with trees: “I got to work straight away. I chopped out the bushes, dug trenches, laid irrigation pipes, built cattle enclosures, erected fences and to service tractors.”

Mavhungu was in constant consultation with his mentors for advice. At the beginning of October that same year, Mavhungu was milking cows, turning it into a commercial dairy farm and mentorship institution.

The 800-cow rotary parlour produces around 10 000 l of milk per day. A large portion of this milk is supplied to Clover. The Fort Hare Dairy Trust is already economically viable. And if that isn't enough, its success has seen the birth of three other projects, Middeldrift Dairy Farm, the Keiskamma Irrigation Scheme and the Ncera Macadamia project.

Middeldrift magic

One of the first student graduates from the trust, 22-year-old Jeanet Nyeleti Rhokhotso, is now managing Middeldrift, which began operating in November 2008. This project was funded through a R9,9 million grant from the National Empowerment Fund and a further R8,2 million provided by Amadlelo Agri.



At the tender age of 22, Jeanet Nyeleti Rhokhotso proudly manages the Middeldrift Dairy Farm

Middeldrift has transformed itself into a full-fledged commercial dairy farm. The Gwebindla Trust, made up of 65 families from the Middeldrift community, provided the 280 ha.

“We have 600 cows on this farm and our current production is 1,2 million litres of milk per year. Our target is to produce more than 3,8 million litres,” said Rhokhotso. So far, 16 permanent workers from the community are employed at the farm and the milk they produce goes to Clover.

The work doesn't stop

“It has never been easy,” said Rhokhotso. “We are up at 04:30 for the first milking and we only finish up at around eight in the evening. If it weren't for the training I received at the Fort Hare Dairy Trust, I probably would not have been able to cope.”

Middeldrift has been chosen by CenDel, the Milk Producers' Organisation's Centre for Producer Development, to be the supplier of 3 000 portions of 250 ml milk per school day to schools that the provincial department of education will identify. Dr Nico Schutte, managing director of CenDel, said the reason why they chose Middeldrift, was based on the professional management of the project. 