Revival plan for Zebediela Citrus Estate takes shape

By Jedrie Harmse

11 March 2026 | 1:00 pm

As previously reported by Farmer's Weekly, a strategic partnership between the Bjatladi Communal Property Association, which holds the title to Zebediela Citrus Estate for the community, and Women Investment Portfolio Holdings aims to revive the once-renowned estate after years of neglect.

First impressions: the broken wall at the entrance to Zebediela Citrus Estate in Limpopo is a stark reminder of the years of neglect the historic farm has endured. *Image: Jedrie Harmse*

The agreement appoints Women Investment Portfolio Holdings (WIPHOLD) as strategic investor and managing partner responsible for implementing a master plan previously approved by the Bjatladi Communal Property Association (CPA), the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, and the then-national Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development.

Established in 1917, Zebediela Citrus Estate in Limpopo was once the largest citrus producer in the Southern Hemisphere and a major exporter. However, years of mismanagement, internal conflict, and financial distress after its restitution to the Bjatladi CPA in 2003 led to its collapse. The 13 600ha estate now requires extensive rehabilitation.

Government has expressed its commitment to supporting the estate's revival through private investment and the implementation of the master plan.

"This project goes beyond agriculture and has an impact on the wider economy. An asset of this magnitude cannot collapse on our watch," Limpopo Premier Dr Phophi Ramathuba said during an event held on the farm in February 2026.

Representatives of the Bjatladi CPA, community members, government officials, and other stakeholders gathered at the event to witness WIPHOLD's official handover of the signed agreement to the CPA.

Management of the project

Following a request for proposals issued by the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) on behalf of the Bjatladi community, and after a formal evaluation process and due diligence, WIPHOLD was appointed as strategic investor and managing partner.

"The agreement confirms WIPHOLD as the chosen strategic investor and managing partner, subject to a number of conditions, one of which is proof of available funding for the project," Ronnie McKenzie, overall project executive at WIPHOLD, told *Farmer's Weekly*.

He added that a management structure would be established to oversee the project, ensuring strong social mobilisation so the community remains fully involved and retains a sense of ownership.

Ramathuba emphasised that the Bjatladi CPA will retain ownership of the land: "The Bjatladi CPA must remain the landlord. The farmers appointed by WIPHOLD will manage the land on their behalf, and the farmers and the province will pay rent to use the farm."

Ronnie McKenzie, overall project executive at WIPHOLD, will oversee implementation of the turnaround strategy at Zebediela Citrus Estate.

As managing partner, WIPHOLD will have overall oversight and accountability for the project.

According to McKenzie, implementation of the turnaround strategy has already begun.

"Agri Technovation, a global precision farming and agricultural technology company, is currently conducting soil tests and evaluating the condition of the orchards on the farm," he explained.

The company's report will determine how much of the existing orchards can be rehabilitated. "Initial indications are that almost 95% of the trees may need to be removed, either because of age (some are around 50 years old) or because of severe damage caused by neglect," he said.

Hope for the future

Speaking to *Farmer's Weekly*, Leslie Makgabo, newly appointed chairperson of the Bjatladi CPA, said the CPA has welcomed the appointment of WIPHOLD as strategic partner.

"We want to take the farm back to where it was before. [WIPHOLD] are the right people for the job. They work differently to others; they showed us on other citrus farms in Tzaneen what they are capable of," he said.

Makgabo believes the revitalisation of the estate could create more than 2 000 job opportunities within the next five years. He added that much-needed repairs to the farm's perimeter fencing have already begun.

According to Makgabo, the previous Bjatladi CPA leadership had been reluctant to work with the LDARD.

"But I am ready to work with the department and listen to the advice of everyone appointed to manage the farm," he added.

A scientific redevelopment plan

Farmer's Weekly also spoke to Jan Alberts, an independent agribusiness adviser who served as project manager of the team that developed the master plan.

Alberts was contracted by Impact Catalyst, a South African non-profit organisation established in 2019 to drive large-scale socio-economic development through public-private partnerships.

The master plan was developed for the Bjatladi CPA by the LDARD, and the planning process was co-funded by the Industrial Development Corporation and Anglo American.

"The process that led to the master plan took three years and began with a detailed hydrological assessment to determine the sustainable scale of irrigation on the estate," Alberts explained.

He added that the project will require substantial recapitalisation.

"The farm has been severely neglected during three administrative transitions over the past 20-plus years. Simply repairing damaged infrastructure will not be sufficient."

Over the years, a variety of operators have worked on the estate.

"Some operators pursued short-term gains without reinvesting in orchards or infrastructure. Others attempted improvements but lacked the necessary capital," he said.

Despite widespread scepticism about further investment in the project, Alberts believes the master plan provides a credible roadmap for redevelopment.

Despite years of decline, the estate's soils remain highly productive. Preparations have already begun to plant cash crops as part of the early recovery strategy.

This initiative could ultimately serve as a blueprint for future community public-private partnerships addressing challenges faced by failed land reform projects.

"With the right partners who have access to capital and technical expertise, the farm has a realistic chance of becoming viable again and possibly regaining its iconic status," he said.

The master plan proposes re-establishing the citrus orchards with modern varieties using optimised orchard management practices.

"The soil quality is excellent, the climate is mild, and there is sufficient water to sustain production of at least 550ha of citrus," Alberts added.

Current plantings include 602ha of citrus and 153ha of macadamias, which he said reflects past overestimation of the farm's sustainable water capacity.

There are approximately 250 boreholes on the farm, evidence of past attempts to maximise water supply during dry periods.

Alberts believes WIPHOLD is well suited to the project.

"They have demonstrated farming expertise and a commitment to community development. Their maize project on communal land in the Eastern Cape, which they have managed successfully for more than a decade, is certainly no small achievement," he explained.

Financial oversight

McKenzie outlined the proposed funding structure and governance model for the estate.

"The estate will have two primary shareholders: the Bjatladi community (40%) and WIPHOLD (40%). The remaining 20% will be allocated to specialist farmers appointed to manage specific crops, such as macadamias," he explained.

Standard shareholder governance principles will apply, with clear dividend policies and financial reporting mechanisms.

"Rental income and dividends will be distributed among the 331 claimant households, and a portion of the funds will remain in the Bjatladi CPA committee account to cover administrative costs. Transparency in the flow of funds will be ensured," McKenzie said.

A board of directors will be established, with the Bjatladi CPA holding 40% of the seats.

In addition, a social mobilisation manager will be appointed to act as liaison between the project management team and the community.

McKenzie believes the partnership between WIPHOLD, the Bjatladi community, and government provides the foundation for long-term success.

"Zebediela Citrus Estate will be restored to its former glory through this strong partnership. This is a long-term project aimed at revitalising a land reform initiative that began more than 20 years ago," he concluded.

Jedrie Harmse

Jedrie Harmse started his career in 1985 in the agricultural sector as a magazine editor and is currently a freelance photo journalist for Farmers' Weekly. He has over 30 years of experience across multiple disciplines in the publishing industry. "Though I didn't intentionally choose agriculture, it seems to have chosen me — and I keep returning to it, drawn by the outdoors, the adventure, the stories, inspiring people, and endless opportunities for photography and writing."