

South Africa seeks US\$5.4m to revive Zebediela citrus estate

The Limpopo Economic Development Agency (LEDA) and the Department of Agriculture and Land Reform have partnered with the Bjatladi Communal Property Association (BCPA) to attract a strategic investor capable of restoring operations at the Zebediela Citrus Estate in South Africa.

Located about 60 kilometers south of Polokwane within the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, the estate was once one of the largest orange producers in the southern hemisphere. It supplied thousands of tons of fruit to global markets before its collapse.

LEDA spokesperson Leo Gama said the agency's mandate includes creating conditions that encourage investment across economic sectors to stimulate job creation. "All key projects with potential to achieve that are promoted by LEDA. The aim is to revive projects such as the Zebediela Citrus Estate once all affected stakeholders agree. Hence, our campaign to attract an investor," Gama said.

He added that any investor must meet specific requirements, including at least 10 years of experience in citrus farming, the ability to provide a bank-guaranteed investment of about US\$5.4 million (R100 million), and a willingness to form an equity-based joint venture with the BCPA.

This initiative follows meetings between the BCPA and the Limpopo government aimed at rescuing the estate. MEC for Agriculture and Rural Development, Nakedi Kekana, said, "The importance of the citrus farm cannot be overstated. It plays a crucial role in providing much-needed jobs in the community."

It was agreed during discussions to develop a master plan outlining how the farm could be revived and to explore potential investment opportunities. Zebediela's decline began after a successful land claim in 2003 transferred ownership to the community. Since then, the estate has struggled with management issues and internal disputes, leading to court cases and mounting debts exceeding US\$9 million (R170 million) by late 2023. Operations were suspended, and workers were told to stop reporting for duty.

The 3,000-hectare farm now faces further challenges, including vandalism, theft of infrastructure, and livestock grazing on unprotected land. Many trees have been cut down for firewood, and former staff housing has been stripped.

Long-time worker Maria Lekoloane said, "We get excited every time the provincial government promises to restore the plantation. But we end up disappointed when nothing happens."

Government and LEDA remain hopeful that the right investor could help restore the farm's operations and employment opportunities for the surrounding communities.

Source: Sunday World (https://sundayworld.co.za/news/hope-on-the-horizon-for-zebediela-as-investor-hunt-intensifies/#goog_rewarded)

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