THE SEED INDUSTRY

South Africa’s seed industry was established in the 1940’s. Consolidation started in 1980 with the establishment of the Association of National Seed Organisations (ANSO). However, as government decided to transfer some of its functions to the private trade, specifically seed certification, the South African National Seed Organisation (SANSOR) was formed in June 1989.

According to information supplied by SANSOR, the South African seed industry had a turnover of more than R2,1 billion in 2004/05. This was made up primarily by summer grain and winter cereal crops (76%), vegetables (15%), pasture and forage species (7%), with flowers accounting for less than 2%. Genetically modified cotton accounted for approximately 90% of local cottonseed sales, while this estimate was 52% and 20% for genetically modified soybean and maize seed, respectively. The demand for hybrid seed obtained through conventional breeding was still the main driving force on most markets, both locally and abroad, whilst the market for open pollinated cultivated varieties was limited to Sub-Saharan Africa.

The seed industry is regulated under the Plant Improvement Act, 1976 (Act No. 53 of 1976) to ensure orderly trade in seed. This Act makes provision for the registration of premises from which the sale, cleaning and packing of seed may be undertaken and to prescribe the conditions subject to which seed may be sold. Included in the Act is provision for the establishment of certification and other schemes and it also provides for the designation of the authority that shall exercise the powers, perform the functions and carry out the duties conferred upon them.

SANSOR has been appointed as the designated body to administer seed certification schemes under the Plant Improvement Act of 1976. The South African Seed Certification Scheme is a legally prescribed scheme underwritten by provision of this legislation. However, participation in seed certification is voluntary. The basic objective of seed certification is to make seed of superior quality available and guarantee the quality by means of a certificate, seal and label. The emphasis is on genetic quality i.e. varietal true-to-type, with high requirements of germination and physical purity. Strict field requirements are laid down for seed production.

Seed testing started in South Africa in the late 1940s. The Official Seed Testing Station (OSTS) is based at Roodeplaat. The OSTS has as it aim to ensure the physical and physiological quality of seed. Its functions include the development of policy and guidelines for the physical and physiological quality of seed and also to control, investigate and maintain seed quality. With the rationalisation of the DoA, a system was introduced whereby private and company seed testing laboratories are able to register and conduct tests for own purposes, test seed for certification purposes and also advertise their testing services at a cost. Currently 24 such laboratories are registered in accordance with the prescriptions in the PIA whereby testing of approximately 35 000 seed samples takes place on an annual basis. This frees the OSTS to deliver an official service in terms of legislation.

Even though the environment in South Africa is not always favourable for seed production, sufficient seed is produced for export purposes. During the 2004/05 financial year, 2 125 International Certificates (International Seed Testing Association seed lot (Orange) and sample (Blue) indicating seed quality, were issued by the Official Seed Testing Station. Most of the applications were for maize (64%), onion types (8%), dry beans (5%) and for groundnuts (4%). The remainder (19%) was for a wide range of agronomic and vegetable crops.

South Africa exports seeds for crops such as cowpeas, dry beans, groundnuts, maize, pearl millet, sorghum, soybeans and sunflower to Africa (Angola, DRC, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Sudan, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe); Asia (Pakistan, Turkey); South America (Argentina, Uruguay) and Europe (France). Most of the seed, however, is exported to Africa. Certain seed companies have also exported vegetable seed such as cabbage, carrots, garden beans/beet/peas, onion types, pepper, pumpkin, tomato, swiss chard and watermelon to Africa (Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe); USA; Asia (China, Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka); Europe (Holland) and Australia.

With regard to imported seed, 186 seed lots were officially sampled upon arrival in South Africa in 2004/05. These seed lots comprise a large variety of agronomic (16 species) and vegetable (13 species) crops, as well as forage grasses (11 species). Most of these were for ryegrass (34%), a temperate grass type utilised for forage purposes and the ryegrass seed lots were mostly imported from New Zealand. Thereafter 12% were for lucerne imported from Australia. The seed industry imports seed from countries such as the USA, Europe (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands), Japan, Australia and New Zealand, as well as South America (Uruguay).

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