

Obert Chifamba recently in NYANGA

BENEFICIARIES of the land reform programme who are producing potato seed in Nyanga have expressed concern over high costs of production.

This, the farmers say, was making it difficult for resource-poor but interested farmers to break into the sector.

The cost of producing a hectare of potato seed is US\$9 000 that is further compounded by fuel and labour costs.

"We are classified as a horticultural entity so our wages are higher than those of other sectors. For labour we have both the technical and non-technical staff, which makes our wage bill huge," Mr Edward Buwu of Nyanga Downs Farm said recently. Nyanga Downs Farm has a total of 185 permanent workers while during peak periods the number rises to 220. The cost of basic fertilisers such as Compound C is also a major concern.

A 50kg bag costs US\$32. "Financing potato seed production is a major challenge to many farmers, which has forced us to rely heavily on borrowing from banks. "We get loans from CBZ Bank because the revenue from our operations falls short of covering all that we need to fund a new crop," he said.

Mr Buwu, who was resettled at Nyanga Downs in 2006, said potato seed production was a very delicate activity that was done under quarantined conditions in areas gazetted by the Government.

In quarantine there are different levels of production - there are those that produce foundation seed that later produces double A1, which is what the farmers in Mr Buwu's category get.

"We then produce double A2 that we are not allowed to retain. We sell it to commercial farmers and the Potato Seed Co-op at a price of US\$30 per 30kg pocket. "The price though acceptable at the moment may still need to be adjusted to between US\$35 and US\$40 per pocket. What we are producing at the moment is not even enough for the domestic market so the price does not reflect the demand," Mr Buwu further explained.

Under the quarantine conditions farmers have to adhere to particular standards starting from land preparation, agronomic management, harvesting up to marketing.

The land has to be cropped for a consecutive two years before going fallow for another three years during which grass such as Love and Rhodes grass is grown to break the cycle of diseases and pests.

Those farmers that grow potatoes outside quarantine conditions will later sell to those who need them for the table.

Production manager at the farm Wonder Shenje said potato seed production needed complex management with too many disease threats to take care of.

"Diseases such as bacterial wilt demand zero tolerance in which affected seed has to be destroyed or condemned to the table," he said .

The land on which the disease is spotted is also required to go for 20 years without anything growing on it to starve and kill the bacteria," he said.

He, however, said that the current price of US\$1 000 per ton of seed potato was reasonably viable since most of them could manage between 25 and 30 tons per hectare.

there are diseases such as verticillium wilt, rhizoctonia wilt and rosalinia wilt had a certain level of tolerance that allowed the farmer to harvest the affected crop before putting the field under a three-year rotation cycle to destroy the disease.

Another farmer who did not want to be named said potato seed production needed a lot of land for rotational purposes.

"The farmer needs at least 30ha for a successful rotation and anything less than that leaves him facing acute challenges," she said.

The farmer further lamented the fact that with seed potato there was no room for the growing of any other crop except maybe for deciduous fruits and sometimes flowers, which left them perennial buyers of grain.

Potato seed producers from Nyanga are responsible for producing the seed that is used throughout the country under the quarantined conditions gazetted by the Government.

The farmers are few and unable to adequately meet demand hence the need for more players to come in- something possible only after the issue of the prohibitive costs of production is addressed to attract new players.