ORGANIC NEWS

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Welcome to our newsletter covering news from the organic sector over the past two months. Our theme continues to focus on transitioning to organic agriculture.

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SAOSO SOUTH AFRICAN ORGANIC SECTOR ORGANISATION

PGS | SOUTH AFRICA

FARMER STORY: ANGUS MCINTOSH FROM SPIER

In 1692, Spier was among the first farms established in Stellenbosch. Today, Spier's organic pastures span 650 hectares, and its commitment to regenerative farming practices is internationally recognised. Farmer Angus McIntosh began cultivating a small section of Spier fifteen years ago and now oversees the entire farm using regenerative methods. He is one of two grass fed, pasture-reared beef producers in the Western Cape that uses high-density, rotational, multi-species grazing.

"For me, the most important thing about regenerative agriculture is not the how or the what but the WHY," says Angus. "The how is not complicated. The most difficult thing to manage with a regenerative system is human discipline because it is labour intensive as the animals need to be moved often and the system only works if the animals are moved."

Angus moves his cattle two to three times per day, the chickens are moved daily and the pigs once a week. It will be at least six weeks before the animals return to the same paddock, where the plant life will be thriving thanks to the nutrients left behind.

"We have lots of animals for a short time in spaces with long rest periods in between which is the crux of regenerative

agriculture. This is where the vegan movement is not making things better. Yes, animals are being abused in the factory farm, mainstream system but animals are the cornerstone of fixing a broken system.

"The why should we farm regeneratively is also simple: the human race is going extinct. We have skyrocketing cancer rates, plummeting fertility, inflammatory diseases. And when we look at why the human race is going extinct, it is because we are not designed to live in a toxic environment. Our food, water, air, clothing, medicine, technology are all polluting our lives. So I looked at what can I do to combat these issues? Well I can fix our farm and make it healthy, and therefore our products coming off the farm will be healthy. Organic, regenerative food has less pollutants and is better for you and the planet."

In the beginning, Spier established their pastures with 18 varieties of grasses and legumes for the benefit of both the animals and the soil microbes. The cattle roam freely in uncrowded pastures, eating only grasses. They themselves address any mineral deficiencies they may be experiencing by always having access to their free-choice mineral licks.

"Grass-fed beef is tastier and healthier, particularly considering the important balance of omega 3 to 6 fatty acids. Our cattle are never given growth hormones. Everything they eat is free of glyphosate."

The biggest component of the business is Farmer Angus Eggs. The chickens sleep and lay their eggs in Eggmobiles - custom-made travelling henhouses – and every day they roam and forage on pastures. The hens eat glyphosate-free feed and are never given growth hormones or routine antibiotics.

Angus's pigs dine on food waste from the Spier restaurants, as well as waste from retailers and even an ice cream factory. The pigs spend most of their time grazing and rooting around in the pastures.

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"Currently 52% of what they eat is glyphosate-free feed and the rest is upcycled food waste."

About 250 hectares of the farm are part of an ongoing rewilding project to restore the local fynbos vegetation. The cleared alien vegetation is used for firewood, composted or mulched. "Much of the rewilding is done on large tracts of land, and some of it is strategically planted as shelter belts. These environmental buffer zones provide living and breeding spaces to endemic animals and insects such as birds and bees. This biodiversity strengthens the resiliency of the ecosystem against wind, drought, flood, and fire."

FARMERS' MARKET MANUAL LAUNCH

SAOSO and PGS SA's Pollinator Programme funded by GIZ enabled 51 Knowledge Products to be developed but one that they are most proud of is the How to set up a Farmers' Market - A guide for South African PGS groups to establish and host Farmers' Markets.

"In order for PGS to survive and thrive, we need more organic farmers with surplus, and the best way to achieve that is to ensure they can sell more produce," says Sheryl Ozinsky, co-founder of Cape Town's Oranjezicht City Farm and Market. "Farmers' markets can be centres of entrepreneurship and economic activity creating hundreds of thousands of jobs while keeping people healthy. This manual - and the online training that preceded the printing of the manual - is to help PGS organic farmers establish farmers' markets in their own communities to sell their produce and to create vibrant community spaces for people to meet and connect."

You can download the manual from the PGS SA website.

SAOSO ATTENDS ZAMBIA'S AGROECOLOGY CONFERENCE

From 21 to 22 May, Zambia hosted their inaugural Agroecology Conference which was attended by Matthew Purkis, Head of Joint Operations at the SAOSO Foundation and Ecosystem Architect at Project Biome. The conference brought together policy makers, farmers, NGOs, and grassroots organisations from across the region and served as a crucial platform to discuss the transformative potential of agroecology in transitioning food systems and fostering social equality through more ethical and sustainable value chains.

"SAOSO was proud to participate in this pivotal event and the significance of this gathering cannot be overstated. Agroecology, with its emphasis on sustainable farming practices that work in harmony with nature, represents a powerful approach to addressing the challenges facing modern agriculture. By integrating ecological principles into agricultural systems, agroecology aims to enhance biodiversity, improve soil health, and reduce dependency on chemical inputs, thereby promoting environmental resilience and food security."

Key discussions at the conference revolved around several critical topics:

1. **Farmer Managed Seed Systems:** There is a growing recognition of the importance of preserving traditional seed varieties and empowering farmers to manage their own seed systems. This approach not only enhances biodiversity but also ensures that seeds are adapted to local conditions, which is vital for resilient farming communities.

2. **Access to Regional Markets:** Strengthening regional markets is essential for supporting small-scale farmers and ensuring fair prices for their produce. By developing robust local supply chains, farmers can achieve greater economic stability and reduce their reliance on volatile global markets.

3. **Training Programs for Youth:** Engaging the next generation in sustainable agriculture is crucial for the future of food systems. Training programs aimed at young people are being highlighted as a means to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to pursue careers in agroecology, thereby securing a sustainable future for farming communities.

"SAOSO actively contributed to these discussions, sharing insights from its initiatives that aligned with the conference's goals. Our work in promoting sustainable farming practices, supporting local seed systems, and fostering market access for smallholders is making a tangible difference in communities across the region.

We were particularly excited about the focus on youth engagement at the conference. Empowering young people to take an active role in agroecology is essential for long-term sustainability. Through our training programs like Regenerative Organic Agriculture and Mindfulness (ROAM), we aim to inspire and equip the next generation with the tools and knowledge necessary to drive the agroecology movement forward. By investing in youth, we are not only fostering innovation but also ensuring that the principles of sustainable agriculture continue to thrive.

Additionally, SAOSO's initiatives in supporting farmer-managed seed systems are being well-received. These systems empower farmers to preserve and exchange traditional seed varieties, enhancing genetic diversity and resilience against climate change. Our efforts to facilitate access to regional markets are also gaining attention. By connecting small-scale farmers with local buyers, we are helping to create more equitable and transparent value chains, which are crucial for sustainable economic development.

The conference has underscored the importance of collaboration among all stakeholders—policy makers, farmers, NGOs, and grassroots organisations—in building a more sustainable and just food system. By working together, we can ensure that agroecology is not just an alternative approach but becomes the mainstream practice that underpins our food systems.

As the networking after the conference continues, we look forward to further engaging with our peers, sharing our experiences, and learning from others. The exchange of ideas and best practices is invaluable in our collective mission to transition towards more ethical and sustainable food systems.

The 1st Agroecology Conference in Zambia marked a significant step forward in the global agroecology movement. SAOSO is honoured to be part of this landmark event, contributing to discussions that will shape the future of sustainable agriculture. We remain committed to our mission of promoting agroecology as a means to achieve food security, environmental sustainability, and social equity. Together, we can build a brighter, more sustainable future for all."

RESEARCH ROUNDUP FOR SOUTHERN AFRICA

Research on ecological organic agriculture (EOA) in Southern Africa is moving forward steadily, with renewed interest from conventional quarters and a new willingness to accept that a transition towards agroecological food systems is now an urgent priority.

A recent research call from the Centre for Coordination of Agricultural Research and Development for Southern Africa (CCARDESA), a subsidiary organisation of SADC charged with the responsibility of coordinating programmes of agricultural research in the region was advertised to support Regional Multi-actor Research Networks (RMRN) on Agroecology, with a view to showing how agriculture can transition towards climate resilience and ecological sustainability. Four million Euro is available for the work of a research consortium over the next four years and CCARDESA has convened an independent panel of experts to evaluate the proposals.

Extraordinary Professor Raymond Auerbach, Chair of the Network of Organic Agricultural Researchers in Africa (NOARA) and President of the Technology and Innovation Platform of IFOAM/ Organics International (TIPI), says: "This is an exciting development, and we hope that it will also encourage organisations such as our Agricultural Research Council, which has been rather slow to commission research into organic farming, and our national and provincial departments of agriculture, to get involved in such research.

Another promising development sees the Western Cape Department hosting the 9th World Conference on Conservation Agriculture in Cape Town in July.

Raymond continues: *"The Department has done good work on no-till approaches, and on crop rotation and mulching, as well as soil organic matter. Farmers and scientists will come together to look at best practise and sustainability. I will present papers giving an overview of organic dairy farming and a report on developments in Chinese Organic Dairy Farming."*

Two PhD studies on organic farming in Africa have also been completed recently. Tanzanian Dr Rosemary Mubezi successfully defended her thesis in Oldenburg in Germany, on social capital in Tanzanian organic agriculture, presenting three case studies which showed how farmer groups help farmers to negotiate and to learn better. Catherine Eckert has submitted her thesis on water use efficiency in the Mandela Trials comparing organic and conventional farming systems, and showing that water retention is greater in organic farming systems. It is hoped that these, and other young researchers, will be assisted in presenting their findings at the upcoming 21st Organic World Congress taking place in Taiwan in December. Also, the Network of Organic Agricultural Researchers in Africa (NOARA) has concluded a Memorandum of Agreement with FiBL in Switzerland.

Raymond concludes: *"A paper has also just been published in the Journal Geoheritage entitled "Africa Alive Corridors: Transdisciplinary research based on African footprints" (Linol et al. 2024), which includes a section on food systems. From all the work being done, it is clear to see that climate change has woken many policy makers up to the imperative of changing agriculture and energy systems if we want to survive as a species!"*

PGS FARMER STORY - MAXABANDILE MLAULI

Maxabandile Mlauli is a PGS Co-Pollinator and agroecology farmer in Mount Frere, Alfred Nzo District in the Eastern Cape, about 100km north east of Mthatha. Together with 25 other members they are currently in the process of officially launching their Mount Frere PGS group.

In collaboration with Mrs. Nozameka Bidla and Ms. Thandokazi Semane as the Sinako Sisonke Permaculture Co-operative they farm four half hectare market gardens. Their organic cabbages, potatoes, spinach, beetroot, carrot, lettuce, tomatoes and spring onions are supplied to local schools, hawkers, restaurants, catering companies, and consumers in the community.

Maxabandile says: "We came to the realisation that there was a need to establish a Mount Frere focused PGS group as part of our co-operative strategy to locate ourselves at the nucleus of the development of an organic food sovereignty and food commons plan in the area as our long-term goal. Organic food self-sustainability and poverty eradication through collaborative partnerships between organic co-operatives in Mount Frere forms the cornerstone of our action plan.

"I discovered that my passion in life is organic farming, agroecology, regenerative agriculture and permaculture. It is what I have chosen to dedicate my life to teaching and practising. I believe that many of the problems that we are experiencing in our modern day society stem from human disconnection from nature. It is only through practising and teaching agroecology, regenerative agriculture, and permaculture that we can heal our minds and our bodies as humanity. For, as the land heals, so too will the people find holistic healing."

Being part of PGS provided me with the exposure to the organic and agroecology movement. It enabled me to network with other organic farmers nationally that are doing incredible work to promote the principles of agroecology and organic farming.

The biggest challenges that I have faced in my journey as an organic farmer and a permaculturist is access to a consistent water supply throughout the year. We are mostly dependent on harvesting rainwater to fill up our tanks for irrigation purposes. This creates limitations in terms of the total yield that we can produce, especially in winter. However, we are planning to start building a dam to harvest more rainwater that will sustain our operations in the dry season. We will thankfully also be receiving grant funded water irrigation infrastructure and water storage tanks, which will be a real lifeline for our food production and general co-operative functioning.

There have been a few highlights for me since I have been part of the PGS structure. Firstly, being nominated to attend the co-pollinators programme at Goegededacht farm and finding inspiration from Matt Purkis and Butshabelo Mabunda; meeting the likes of Alex Kruger, Kate Curtis and Professor Vishwas Satgar at the Permaculture Design Course at Goedgedacht farm was also a highlight. Establishing our own co-operative, Sinako Sisonke as PGS farmers in Mount Frere; conceptualising and constructing our own small-scale nursery for seedling production for ourselves and for sale to other farmers, to eliminate the input cost of travelling to Kokstad and neighbouring centres to buy seedlings have been great highlights. Collaborating with organisations such as the National Youth Development Agency, the Small Enterprise Development Agency, and Umsobomvu Youth Fund has also been a notable highlight.

If you are wanting to transition to organic farming, the most important thing is to continue doing more research about the detrimental effects that conventional farming practices have on the environment. This will enable a conventional farmer transitioning to organic farming to develop a framework and an understanding for choosing to pursue the journey of organic farming. Farmers need to be conscious of the effects that their current actions will have on future generations to come. Organic farming practices work with the natural system and seek to create harmony and a thriving ecosystem. Therefore, the best advice that I can give to conventional farmers is to study nature and to follow her footsteps. The most critical processes required in the transition to organic is soil building through composting and mulching; the preparation and use of organic pesticides, crop teas/sprays, and land sculpting such as elevated beds for crop protection and holistic water management."

FARMER TIP: PREPARING YOUR FARM FOR WINTER

PGS Pollinator and ecological organic agriculture practitioner, Nandi Mkwanazi, talks about how to prepare your farm for the colder, winter months.

"Preparing your farm for winter is crucial to protect your crops from frost damage. Frost is a very important climatic parameter to determine the sustainability of a crop in a specific farming area. Some crops are badly damaged or killed in freezing temperatures, caused by ice crystals inside the plant. Crops have different minimum temperatures below which plants will be severely damaged or killed.

Experience has taught me that frost covers are an affordable and effective solution to shield your plants from cold temperatures. Especially if your farm is located in frost prone areas like in the central parts of South Africa and some parts of the Highveld."

Here are some tips on how to prepare your farm with budget-friendly frost covers:

1. Choose the Right Material

- Frost Cloth/Floating Row Covers: These are specifically designed for frost protection and can be reused for multiple seasons. They are lightweight, allow sunlight and moisture to reach the plants, and can protect crops from frost down to about -2°C.
- Plastic Covers: Clear plastic can be used, but it requires ventilation during the day to prevent overheating. It's effective but less breathable, so it should be used with caution.

2. DIY Frame Structures

- PVC Hoops: Create simple hoop structures using PVC pipes. Insert the pipes into the ground on either side of your crop rows and bend them into arcs, forming a tunnel. Drape your frost cover material over the hoops and secure the edges with soil or weights.
- Wooden Stakes: Drive wooden stakes into the ground and stretch the frost cover material over the stakes. This method works well for smaller plots or individual plants.

3. Secure the Covers

- Use rocks, bricks, or soil to weigh down the edges of the covers. This prevents the wind from blowing them away and ensures that the covers stay in place throughout the night.
- For larger areas, consider using clamps or clips to attach the covers to your hoop or stake structures securely.

4. Timing and Maintenance

Timing is critical when preparing for any growing season, the same holds true when preparing for

drops in temperature. The entry date of heavy frost means the end of the growing season for crops that are sensitive to frost during their ripening period. If the crop has not ripened by the exit date costly yield losses may occur.

- Apply Before Frost: Place the covers over your crops in the late afternoon before the frost sets in. This traps the soil's residual heat.
- Remove During the Day: If the weather is sunny and temperatures rise above freezing during the day, remove the covers to allow air circulation and prevent overheating.

5. Extend Coverage

- For perennial plants or shrubs, consider using hessian cloth around the base and covering the root zone with mulch. This helps protect the roots and lower stems from freezing temperatures.

"By using these affordable and practical methods, you can to a large degree effectively shield your crops from frost damage and ensure a productive growing season ahead."

THE ORGANIC & NATURAL PRODUCT EXPO WAS IN CAPE TOWN

Cape Town hosted its first Organic and Natural Products Expo at the end of April with nearly 2,300 feet crossing the threshold over the three days. The Jo'burg Expo is now eagerly anticipated from the 12 - 14 September at the Sandton Convention Centre.

Speaking about the Jo'burg Expo, co-organiser Warren Hickinbotham says: "We have had approaches from a number of countries including Madagascar, Namibia, Botswana, Kenya and Rwanda, and we have renewed commitment from the African Biotrade Festival as well as our sponsor Standard Bank. So Joburg is looking set to be our biggest event yet."

Trade visitors and potential exhibitors can apply via the website: www.organicandnaturalportal.com/expo.

NEWS FROM THE SECTOR

- **ISAN magazine edition 10 released.** The 10th issue of IFOAM Southern Africa Network (ISAN) magazine has been published. This edition provides an global organic overview, dives into the future of food solutions coming out of Zimbabwe, the history of the Cape Town market in Epping, and provides infographics on making compost, bokashi and liquid bio-fertilisers. You can read the online version here.

- **KCOA has launched its online platform.** The Knowledge Centre for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology in Africa has launched its online platform with a wealth of resources created by the five knowledge hubs across the continent designed to fill specific knowledge gaps related to organic agriculture and agroecology. https://kcoa-africa.org/

- **African Centre for Biodiversity celebrating 20 years of resistance against GMOs in Africa** This legacy podcast series reflects on and celebrates the past two decades of ACB's advocacy and activism, with a particular focus on resisting the deployment of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into our agricultural and food systems in Africa. Listen to episode one here.

- **The new Living Farms magazine** For the centenary of biodynamic agriculture, the Section for Agriculture at the Goetheanum have launched the bi-annual 'Living Farms' magazine. This first issue of the magazine contains contributions from members of the biodynamic movement worldwide. Read the online magazine here.

CALL TO ACTION

Participate in our "Converting to organic" webinar series

SAOSO and PGS SA are in the process of organising a four-part webinar series focused on aiding farmers in transitioning from conventional agriculture to organic practices. If you possess expertise and insights that could benefit our community in adopting a more sustainable farming approach, we encourage you to reach out.

Contact PGS SA to explore collaboration opportunities and contribute to the continued progress of the agricultural sector: info@pgssa.org.za

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Here's how!

We invite all consumers to be actors of change by actively asking about the origins of the food they buy from their retailers, asking them about providing certified organic food in their food outlets.

Consumers can also get involved by supporting your local PGS group. You can go to farm visits and meet your farmers, see their processes, and find out who they supply.

Have a look at this PGS map to find your nearest group: https://www.pgssa.org.za/pollinator-map/

If you're interested in joining SAOSO as a member or contributing to our efforts through donations, please feel free to do so.

Become a member!

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