



Oxen and the Soya harvest, an historical approach. A real step back in time!

It is not an exaggeration to say that modern farming has been dealt both heavy blows from the supply chain side in the past few months but has been rewarded with substantially improved commodity prices.

However, when one is paying 40% more for fuel than one did a few months ago, it is not always a question of the cost but rather the availability of finance needed to invest in a new crop which here, at Sandstone Estates, has already commenced with wheat planting underway and soya beans and other crops planned for the October/November period.

We have always been mindful of the fact that our very substantial Heritage footprint contains many gems which come to our rescue. A trailer full of seed is indifferent to who pulls it and we have many tractors which are 60 or more years old that can do that job.

More recently we were faced with a very unique problem. We received nearly double our annual rainfall and not only did we have substantial rain throughout the rainy season from November to April but it continued to rain well into May. This meant that, although our crops were ready for harvesting, the machines could not get in due to the very soggy ground conditions. Fortunately, a large part of Sandstone Estates is on undulating ground and therefore there is good drainage which has allowed the combine harvesters to access the land on a selective basis.

However, there are many areas which will remain wet throughout the winter and, with that in mind, we have adopted a very unique approach. We are fortunate to have access to excellent manual labour in sufficient quantities for us to actually harvest our crops by hand. This would normally not be financially viable but with the substantial increase in commodity prices we feel that we can now justify it. Tractors will not be able to recover these crops and so we turn to a much more ancient technique, namely the use of our patient, robust and ever willing team of Afrikaner oxen. This programme has been ongoing for some weeks now and will probably continue right into the maize harvesting season which will start in a few weeks' time. Currently the oxen are hauling soya beans from our lands, which have been lifted by African ladies, and which are then transported to a central point where they are put through a stationary combine harvester.

Even if this particular programme does not generate profits due to the relatively high labour cost, we are pleased to be able to provide an unexpected boost to the local community in terms of the money that we invest in such manual labour. However, it does not escape one's notice that the oxen do not charge and they do not consume fuel either, so the deployment of our oxen, for which they were bred, is an almost zero cost exercise for us. Obviously we could not do this across the board as a permanent replacement for mechanisation but they are certainly proving their worth when it comes to helping us recover crops that would otherwise for all practical purposes be lost.

Our photo gallery shows our harvesting team and our Oxen in action, hard at work in the Soya fields. A real step back in time!