MEDIA ADVISORY

Regional Conservation Agriculture Symposium
8-10 February 2011
Emperor’s Palace Hotel, Johannesburg, South Africa

Theme: The Science and Practice of Conservation Agriculture in Southern Africa

The symposium is the first of its kind to be held in southern Africa and will bring together over 120 regional practitioners to share information and experiences in Conservation Agriculture and its impacts on rural households. The ultimate aim of the symposium co-hosted by FANRPAN, FAO, ACT and NEPAD, is to agree on a set of recommendations required at technological, institutional and policy levels to scale up Conservation Agriculture among small and large scale farmers in southern Africa.

“The symposium presents an exciting opportunity to bring together Farmers Unions, Researchers, Government and NGOs to share knowledge and map the way forward for Conservation Agriculture”, said Lewis Hove, FAO Regional Conservation Agriculture Coordinator.

Conservation Agriculture is a way of farming to achieve higher sustained productivity, increased profits and food security without compromising the environment. It is based on three principles:

- **Minimum soil disturbance**- where crops are planted in “unploughed” soils, thus not “disturbing” the soil in terms of organic matter, top soil loss and soil water loss.
- **Permanent soil cover**- crop residues are retained in the field as mulch and/or cover crops are grown throughout the year. The soil is protected and water retention is optimized.
- **Crop associations and rotations**- Crops are planted in different associations and rotations with one another in space and over time. This method helps to control pests and diseases and ensures household dietary diversity.

This way of farming has been shown to more than double crop yields which for small holder farmers in the region, currently averages 0.5 tonnes per hectare. However, less than 1% of cultivated land in southern Africa is under Conservation Agriculture, compared to 46% in southern America.

Background:
Southern Africa’s agricultural productivity is threatened by soil degradation and erosion, droughts and high temperatures. This is exacerbated by climate change-induced droughts, floods and high temperatures. In a region characterized by poverty, the need to boost and sustain productivity is critical. A potential solution to the problem is Conservation Agriculture (CA).

Why should the region be concerned about CA?

Agricultural production is the basis for development in a region where more than 70% of the population and the majority of the poor are engaged in rain-fed agriculture with low production levels. CA can contribute to alleviating the constraints to agriculture, i.e.

- Climate change, including droughts and floods
- Poor land use management practices
- Low production yields
What are the benefits of adopting CA?
- Increased and stabilized crop yields and improved food security
- Crops resistant to drought
- Improved soil health
- Reduced labour and production costs
- Reduced land degradation
- Environmental protection
- Stimulation of rural development and economies

What are the challenges of CA?
- Necessary policy support to convert to CA practice
- Limited knowledge of CA principles, practice and benefits
- Production constraints, such as weed control
- Access to funds for investment in CA
- Lack of suitable equipment and input/output markets
- Policy institutions that support CA

Media opportunities:
- Refer to the attached programme. If you require any interviews with the speakers, please contact the people listed below
- High profile officials from government, agricultural and scientific sectors will be present and they can also be interviewed.
- Join in the networking sessions and discuss burning issues.
- The symposium will have a dedicated media room where journalists can conduct interviews, have access to a computer, telephone and fax machine. Interviews can also be conducted from this venue.
- A media pack will be distributed to journalists.

You are invited to attend the symposium and add your voice to the growing pool of knowledge in this critical area. Please RSVP to Yuven Gounden by 7 February 2011.

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