

## **MEDIA INTERVIEW**

**Programme:**

**Grootplaas - 22 May 2018**

**GUEST:**

**Ronald Heath, Forestry South Africa**

<https://agriorbit.com/grootplaas-bekyk-die-bosbou-bedryf/>

## **ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

### **Elsa Esterhuizen:**

Good morning and welcome to Grootplaas. Forestry is more than just the planting, management and care of wood plantations. It is about the environment in which these plantations are located, the animal and plant species that form part thereof and the continuous review of practices to ensure that the impact on the environment is as low as possible. However, there are many challenges facing this industry. Ronald Heath from Forestry South Africa is visiting us in the studio this morning to share more information about the industry.

[01.00.75-03.20.00 - News] [03.20.00-04.18.00 - Weather]

There are mixed opinions about forestry and the impact that it has on the environment and the sustainability of our resources. Ronald Heath from Forestry South Africa now offers a clear view of the industry and how it is managed. Good morning and welcome.

### **Ronald Heath:**

Good morning Elsa. Thank you very much.

### **Elsa Esterhuizen:**

Ronald please tell us what Forestry South Africa does?

### **Ronald Heath:**

Forestry South Africa is an industry association. We represent the 11 major forestry companies, about 1300 medium-scale tree farmers and around 24,000 small-scale farmers in the forestry industry. In all areas of commonality where we negotiate with government, whether it is about environmental affairs, or research, we do it on behalf of the companies to ensure a holistic approach to forestry instead of each company interacting with government as to how to move forward.

### **Elsa Esterhuizen:**

It is also a very interesting industry, so just give us a bit more background about plantations and the production process.

### **Ronald Heath:**

Plantations are only farms with trees, but they are unique and one of the biggest reasons why it is so unique is the time it takes to get a plantation into production.

At the moment, from plant to first harvest, the shortest time is currently probably 6 years and can extend to 35 years where we produce sawlogs. So, during this period there is also a lot to be done. Weed control, which is the same as all agricultural crops, but there are also processes like pruning your tree trunks to produce clean wood and then the thinning out to selectively remove trees to produce certain products over the time period. So, this is why it is so unique because of the time involved from plant to harvest.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

Please tell us how big is the South African Forestry Industry?

**Ronald Heath:**

At present, about 1% of the total land area in South Africa is being used for forestry. That's 1.2 million hectares. It's a small piece but it's a big contribution to the country and the economy.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

What contribution does Forestry then make to the country's economy.

**Ronald Heath:**

At the moment it contributes about R48 billion towards the Gross Domestic Product. The industry currently employs about 165,000 people. For the last few years we have had a positive trade balance every year, about R9 billion positive trade balance. I think is very positive for the industry given the current state of the economy.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

And how would you say the industry grew over the years?

**Ronald Heath:**

Unfortunately, the industry did not grow much. Over the last 30 years, we have probably only grown about 9% and there are many factors that put a lot of pressure on the industry. During some years, we even saw a reduction in plantations in South Africa. Even though the industry only grew 9% in surface area through the application of technology, research and implementation of new information, we have probably produced about 55% more wood from 9% more land area. I think this is also a very positive thing for the industry.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

And do you think the future may show more growth?

**Ronald Heath:**

It is possible. There are many people who want to invest in forestry, but there are a lot of obstacles that hold back the growth of the industry at the moment.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

I actually want to ask you what are the biggest challenges you experience in the industry?

**Ronald Heath:**

The biggest challenges are probably finding areas that can be planted. We are one of the industries that is most regulated. We are the only land use that is registered as a stream flow reduction activity and being the only one in the country; this makes it very difficult.

For anyone wanting to invest in forestry and plant new plantations, you need to do an environmental impact study, you need a water licence, and only then can you get a afforestation permit or license. And all these processes make it quite difficult to get new people to invest in the industry. With that comes the challenge of very little financial support from the Government for any small scale growers who want to invest in a new forestry development -- that makes it very difficult to expand in South Africa.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

So, would you say those challenges are surmountable?

**Ronald Heath:**

I believe most of them are surmountable. Some of them will take longer than one would like, but with Government co-operation and the development of improved planting material, which is once again done by the application of technology, we can finally enlarge the areas in forestry and I think there is a positive outlook towards forestry in South Africa.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

[08.35.00-09.20.00 – Market]

Ronald, one could sometimes say that forestry is often seen in a poor light regarding its impact on the environment. Just expand a little more on that please.

**Ronald Heath:**

Unfortunately, this perception is largely based on historical activities. Forestry has changed drastically since the 1900s and in the last few decades, we became involved in international certification schemes. The schemes enable us to market our wood internationally. Without the certification, you cannot market internationally at all. What certification also requires is to be more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable in your activities and it is strictly regulated.

So, there are many perceptions that plantations are “green deserts” and that there is no biodiversity. Most of this unfortunately, is misperception. Biodiversity in plantations is actually much higher than many people think.

Although it is a monoculture crop, there is still a lot of biodiversity in the management of plantations themselves. It's also not just the area where trees are growing that is being managed by the companies.

There are a considerable number of conservation areas and natural areas that are being managed, and these are kept strictly for conservation purposes. For example, what many people do not know, and you asked, is how the industry grows. In the 1990s, the forestry industry withdrew about 80,000 hectares voluntarily and it was mainly for the conservation of water and to better manage our water resources.

So, [forestry] is seen in a negative light, but as I say, I think it is much more because of the misleading of historical activities -- the way that we manage plantations these days is very sustainable and very responsible. There is a much bigger responsibility these days to manage the environment better and actually to promote it for the future.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

And what does Forestry South Africa exactly do to manage it?

**Ronald Heath:**

Well, the process we use to manage it is by spreading the message to the public to show that we try not only by what we say but also by what we do through putting in place more environmentally friendly management practices.

We also try to make the general public a little more aware of what forestry is. Last year we launched a new webpage <http://forestryexplained.co.za/> which is aimed at the general public and even learners at

school to explain what forestry actually is, what it is about and more of the true facts about forestry and the positive land use that it is. And we are constantly involved in seeing how we can promote our practices as an industry, to make it more sustainable and more accountable.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

I would think that market research also plays an important role in this regard. What is your comment on that?

**Ronald Heath:**

It does yes. In South Africa, there is not much national competition for markets. Our biggest market is international so that's why our association also plays such a big role. We are trying to see forestry in South Africa as Forestry South Africa, and compete against Australia, Chile, Brazil and those countries.

Market research is a major driving force behind this, but again because of how our markets are structured and certification regulations, it does not play such an important role in our environmental management. Environmental management takes preference to the markets. It's about sustainability before it's just about where we sell and how much money we can make.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

You mentioned earlier that much is being done to inform people. Do you think they are informed enough or not?

**Ronald Heath:**

Definitely not. I think there can always be more information to the public. And there is so much information to share. The platforms are, as I said, put in place. Like <http://www.forestryexplained.co.za/> and our other webpage, <http://www.forestry.co.za/> and then another website that we launched this year which is about the use of chemicals, mostly technically oriented to the person who wants to participate in forestry but the public can also benefit greatly from how we manage chemicals, the use of chemicals and their impact on the industry and the environment.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

How are developing farmers supported in this sector?

**Ronald Heath:**

As you can imagine, many of our developing farmers are beneficiaries of land reform. I think similar to the rest of the agricultural sector, there is very little government support, financially and through extension services.

The industry saw it when we started with land reform. Forestry is an industry that is very proactive around land reform. So, one of the great initiatives that many of our big companies implemented is in the event that land claims are finalised. They will meet the beneficiary and propose to them that they rent their land back from them. They will then rent the land with the conditions that they will have it for at least 1 or 2 rotations, which is anything from 6-12 years, then they will assist the landowner in providing optimal planting material. They will then also care for those trees through the production process and while doing it, the new landowner learns how to manage plantations. After every rotation, the landowner is also ensured of a market for his wood, which I think makes it a little more sustainable and after the end of the contract the landowner then has the option to enter into a contract with the company again or to follow pursue any other markets that they want to follow.

And so far, I think the model we use is very successful because most of our land reform, if not all our land reformations in forestry that have already been finalized, are all still in full production. I think compared to the National figures in other sectors, that is very good.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

[0.14.55-0.15.28 – Calendar]

Ronald, please elaborate a bit about your chemical program that you've referred to earlier.

**Ronald Heath:**

In forestry we use chemicals, but as little as possible. Again, in comparison to the larger agricultural sector, we are a very small user of chemicals. It is because we know what the impact of chemicals has on the environment and the people who work in the plantations.

Again because of international certification regulations, although many chemicals are registered for forestry, international certification does not allow us to use it, so we do a lot of hard work to reduce our use of our chemicals and the impact of chemicals on the environment and our people.

We have a working group in the forestry industry that we call TIPWG. It stands for Timber Industry Pesticide Working Group and it is a group of people who focus on the use of chemicals in forestry as a whole. The information they generate is then made available to all our growers and anyone who participates in forestry. And it's also on one of our webpages that I've mentioned before, and the website gives you information about chemicals, how to use it, what to use and all other technical information. It's almost like a one stop shop for anyone who wants to use chemicals in forestry.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

How does technology advances influence the industry?

**Ronald Heath:**

With the fact that we are fairly limited to expand from the aspect of available land, it is very important for the industry to apply technology, develop it and implement it in the industry. It's all about moving forward and producing more. I think it's like I had previously mentioned about the area growing by just 9% over 30 years but showing a 55% increase in production, precisely through the implementation of technology. So, we as an industry, are constantly looking at the development of new plant material, which is more appropriate and address things like climate change, pests and diseases, etc. These are some of our biggest focus points where we can build and progress as an industry, and it is through the development of technology, modernization, mechanization and by reducing input costs. All these things have a major impact on the industry.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

What must happen within the forestry industry in order for it to be sustainable?

**Ronald Heath:**

I actually don't feel like anything has to happen for forestry to be sustainable. We are already a sustainable industry, I believe, and I think it has been proven through all the years of development and the obstacles that the industry had to work through and how we worked through it so that it can be sustainable. I think there is a lot that the industry can do in the future and what we continue to do to make the industry more successful, more sustainable and more responsible. But I think because of the inputs over the last few years and the way that the industry works together very well in the areas of

research, technology implementation and sharing of information, we are sure that we have been sustainable over the years and I believe that by continuing what we have done and implementing all the techniques mentioned we will grow even further and become stronger in the industry and not only stay sustainable.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

Maybe just a last question. When looking at the future of the industry, do you think there will be more interest?

**Ronald Heath:**

I believe so. We are all talking about a more technological world, but we still see the increasing use of paper in the world. Things like newspaper press and magazines may decrease, but a lot of paper is still being used.

The other interesting thing is, as you mentioned technology earlier, many of the trees are no longer only used for paper or wood, as many people might think. It is used for cellulose and micro cellulose and those are only some of the areas that many people do not realize where forestry is used.

A lot of people will get up in the morning and eat fat-free yogurt or ice cream for breakfast, and the cellulose in those products are often made from the wood of eucalyptus trees as are some fabrics like rayon and some plastics. So even if people tend to only think about the paper and all that goes with it, that's not all that forestry is about. Forestry has progressed so much through the years that the tree is not only seen as wood, but more for what we can get out of the wood and then with energy generation and similar things there is also a lot of potential for the industry. So, I think there are many good positive prospects for forestry.

**Elsa Esterhuizen:**

Thank you very much. That was Ronald Heath from Forestry South Africa.

[19.44-20.01 - Ending]

**END OF TAPE**