

Communicating climate information for agricultural applications and adaptation

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At present in Southern Africa, a fairly narrow group of potential users actually receive or have access to climate information and a smaller group actually makes use of them. Agriculture, being heavily dependent on rainfall, comprises the main group of users. Efforts have been made in recent years to strengthen climate information utility to agriculture by targeting provincial and local scales of activity through workshops as well as extension officer training in interpretation of climate forecasts. Users in commercial agriculture have traditionally had greater access to seasonal climate forecasts than users in developing agriculture, as they can potentially approach forecast producers directly (within South Africa, and internationally) through a variety of available channels, including television, the internet and private consultants. They also possess the greatest ability and resources to effect adaptation to climate stress. Forecasts that are available do not possess indications of skill and levels of reliability. It is therefore questionable if they are of any use to a particular user. The question is how can the value of climate information be estimated, and how best can it be used? Users from different sectors were interviewed to determine their requirements from climate information. Consultation with odellers, forecasters and climate data sources followed to determine the feasibility of providing useful and reliable climate information at a temporal and spatial scale that would be useful for specific end users and/or "last mile" intermediaries that would interpret and disseminate information. Finally, the challenges posed by the demands for tailored climate information were assessed in terms of capacity, understanding and reliability. It was acknowledged that access to climate information did not guarantee usefulness and that climate information provision is a venture not to be undertaken without a full understanding of the risks and responsibilities attached thereto. Within a climate change scenario, the ability of climate information systems to mitigate negative effects of climate stress in the water and agricultural sectors, and beyond, is likely to become more, rather than less, critical in the future.