**FRUIT INDUSTRY RE-COMMITS TO WORKER WELFARE**

Producers individually and collectively can now take a stance against any alleged human rights abuses or individuals who exploit their workers, by removing the space for opportunists and those wishing to destroy the agri-sector by continued manipulation of public perceptions based on half-truths, rhetoric, populist statements and generalisations based on exceptions. The silent majority can choose to distance themselves from unacceptable behaviour and work with like-minded stakeholders in the labour fraternity and government in a process of continuous improvement.

HORTGRO[[1]](#footnote-1), the umbrella industry body for a number of deciduous fruit and related industries, have re-committed itself and its producer members to enhance worker welfare and compliance with labour legislation. The progress made by the sector to ensure independent ethical accreditation is regarded as a sound basis for further development and continuous improvement in this sphere.

Anton Rabe, Executive Director of HORTGRO, re-confirmed the view of his industry stakeholders that any transgression of legislation and non-compliance with the minimum wage dispensation are unacceptable and that the industry body will pro-actively assist with enforcement and corrective action where required. “The fruit sector has an independent, legitimate and transparent national platform in SIZA[[2]](#footnote-2) (Sustainability Initiative of SA) through which compliance with labour standards can be measured and demonstrated by individual producers. SIZA is widely recognised by international and domestic trade stakeholders and will be able to provide facts and statistics relating to compliance with labour legislation, health and safety issues, as well as minimum wages”, he said.

The SIZA platform also provides for assistance with proposed corrective actions through which producers can embark on a process of continuous improvement relating to working and living conditions on farms. “This will not only differentiate employers with regard to proven compliance, but will also ensure that broad generalisations that “all farmers are non-compliant” could be refuted as inaccurate, unfair and irresponsible”, Rabe added.

The SIZA platform is open to all agri-sectors and he encouraged all agri-employers to show their commitment to fair, ethical and legally compliant labour practices via participation in SIZA or equivalent platforms.

If any cases of non-compliance are found, HORTGRO has undertaken to assist its members to ensure corrective action is taken. Any unilateral behaviour by employers to negatively adjust the working and wage conditions of workers contra to the parameters contained within legislation, will not be tolerated. He stated that a transparent and clear policy and procedure to deal with alleged or real issues have been developed with input from various stakeholders. He trusts that this procedure will become a standard endorsed by all stakeholders as the model to constructively address the socio-economic and labour issues in rural areas.

There are huge challenges on many fronts in rural areas. The sector as a whole needs to be part of the solution to these issues, but it cannot be held responsible for all that is wrong, nor can it be expected to provide and fund solutions without the support and participation of the other social partners.

The HORTGRO pledge and intent from the deciduous fruit industry specifically, relates to:

1. Rejecting any exploitation of workers or any unilateral behaviour by both employers and employee representatives aimed at circumventing legal requirements pertaining to employment and compliance with legislation as a minimum.
2. This includes the rejection of any unilateral changes to working conditions and any illegal deductions from wages to compensate for new minimum wage increases.
3. Encouraging producers to, where affordable, endeavour to pay more than the minimum wage and to improve employee benefits within a total cost to company approach.
4. The encouragement of constructive dialogue between all stakeholders to ensure moral and ethical behaviour which will ensure a fair working environment and the long term economic viability of the sector.
5. To position and support the SIZA platform as a differentiation point proving compliance and a commitment to a process of continuous improvement.
6. To develop and agree a clear policy and procedure to establish so-called “rules of engagement” between stakeholders, including a complaints procedure to allow social partners to proactively and constructively deal with complaints and instances of non-compliances, as well as to monitor corrective measures.
7. A commitment to develop agri-friendly and practical solutions and communication platforms to address and find sustainable solutions for issues such as collective bargaining, freedom of association and controlled access to farms aligned with the requirements of rural safety and security and the unique realities of the sector on national, regional and local level.
8. An appeal to like-minded stakeholders to assist in creating a stable environment where law and order prevails and where disruptive and criminal elements resorting to intimidation and the disruption of employer-employee relations and rural communities are rejected and such parties are held accountable for their actions.
9. An effort to work towards the development and implementation of a Fruit Industry Social Compact (FISC) to:
   1. Effectively address the needs of rural communities relating to employment and job creation, rural welfare and economic development;
   2. Align commercial requirements such as trade and market access, market development, research, logistics and infrastructure and natural resources to drive rural development through renewed investor confidence; and
   3. Develop and communicate perspectives regarding the realities relating to cost structures in the value chain, on-farm production costs, profitability and sustainable production.

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1. NOTE TO EDITORS: HORTGRO provides industry services for deciduous fruit producers (apples, pears, plums, peaches, nectarines and apricots), as well as a number of other horticultural crops from its head office in Paarl. More detail on: [www.hortgro.co.za](http://www.hortgro.co.za) or enquiries to :[retha@hortgro.co.za](mailto:retha@hortgro.co.za) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. SIZA is a stakeholder driven, user-pay electronic platform – open to all industries nationally - empowering producers to conduct self-assessments prior to independent third party audits verifying compliance with legislation. It also provides tools and best practice guide-lines to members to improve labour practices on farms. More detail on: [www.fruitsa-ethical.org.za](http://www.fruitsa-ethical.org.za) or enquiries to: [chennell@iafrica.com](mailto:chennell@iafrica.com). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)