

# Agri Writers SA acknowledges outstanding achievements in agriculture

At a gala event held in Stellenbosch on Friday evening, the Agricultural Writers SA announced the winners of the 2018 National Farmer, New Entrant into Commercial Agriculture and Agriculturist of the Year. The main sponsors of the event are Bayer, Santam Agriculture, Sanlam and Rovic Leers.



Image via [AgriOrbit](#) From left to right: Leonard Mavhungu, Pieter Graaff and Wandile Sihlobo.

Annually, Agricultural Writers SA acknowledges outstanding achievements of commercial farmers, new entrants into commercial agriculture, and agriculturists. One of the aims of these awards is to give prominence to the role that farmers and agriculturists play in the agricultural sector in South Africa. It is also important to note that the award recipients also impact on the broader economy of the country and the southern African region.

## This year's candidates were:

### Agriculturist of the year

Gauteng – Wandile Sihlobo

Limpopo – Frits van Oudtshoorn

Mpumalanga – Johann du Preez

Western Cape – Prof. Eugene Cloete

## **New entrant into commercial agriculture**

Eastern Cape – Leonard Mavhugu

Gauteng – Mbali Nkabinde

Western Cape – Wayne Mansfield

## **Farmer of the year**

KwaZulu-Natal – Joseph Baynes Estate (Pty) Ltd (Myles van Deventer)

Limpopo – Mahela Boerdery (Edward Vorster & sons)

North West – Johan Styger

Western Cape – Pieter Graaff

## **The winners**

Pieter Graaff of Witzenberg Properties and chairman of Tru-Cape Fruit Markteing was announced as the 2018 National Farmer of the Year. Graaff took over the farming business, Witzenberg Properties, just outside Ceres from his father, dr. Jan Graaff, in 1984. Under his leadership five farming units were added to the original farm resulting in better productivity and an increase in the total turnover and profit. Pieter Graaff also expanded his farming business vertically into the complete value chain.

The six farming units are all situated in four unique climate zones within the Ceres area, spreading the climate risk of the farming business. Each of the six units are operated independently with its own infrastructure. The combined production of the separate farming units makes Pieter Graaff the single largest individual apple producer in South Africa.

Other farming activities include the cultivation of pears, nectarines, peaches, cherries, wine grapes, vegetables, grain, forestry with a sawmill, cattle, sheep and a thoroughbred stud.

Since the onset of his career, Pieter Graaff has made the conscious decision to rather be “a small fish in a big ocean, as opposed to being “a big fish in a small pond”.

Unlike many other entrepreneurial farming companies, Witzenberg Properties chose to develop in partnership rather than alone. With this philosophy, a business was built with far greater influence across the whole value chain.

Witzenberg Properties has a proud tradition of taking care of its people. It is an employee of choice within the greater Ceres area and renowned for a company where people work until retirement. It provides employee benefits beyond the minimum requirements, to provide every employee of Witzenberg Properties the opportunity to live a life of dignity.

The 2018 New Entrant into Commercial Agriculture is Leonard Mavhugu, a farmer from the former Ciskei region of the

Eastern Cape. Leonard Mavhugu is the senior production manager for the transformation dairy business Amadlelo Agri, based in the former Ciskei region of the Eastern Cape. It is a job that puts him in the driving seat of a three-farm operation, running close to 4 000 cows in milk off 1,100 hectares (ha) (a milking platform of 850ha with 250ha of supplementary pasture) with a staff of roughly 100.

A small-town boy from Thohoyandou, in the north-eastern corner of the Soutpansberg, Mavhugu graduated from the Technical University of Tshwane with a diploma in animal production. At the age of 26, Leonard was recruited by a group of dairy farmers who were working towards transformation in the dairy sector through a black-empowered, agri-business Amadlelo Agri. At 27 Leonard became the de facto site supervisor and then manager of Amadlelo's Fort Hare dairy outside Alice in the Eastern Cape.

He has experience (15 years) in pasture-based dairy farming which requires constant, and intelligent, attention to the balance between grass, cows and milk.

Respected by the Eastern Cape's dairy fraternity as a highly competent dairy farmer, and called by some a top operator, Leonard is doing a job that requires skills far in advance of those of good pasture and stock management. Mavhugu is driven, focussed and knowledgeable, and sets a fine example of the high standards he expects his staff to meet.

The 2018 Agriculturist of the Year is Wandile Sihlobo. Sihlobo heads Agribusiness Research at the Agricultural Business Chamber (Agbiz).

He provides timeous and valuable insights to agribusinesses, primary producers and the media. His daily notes to Agbiz members form the basis on which many decisions are taken in the corporate agricultural sphere. Farmers also value his inputs and insights.

He often leads the agricultural conversation in the media and on digital platforms and for the past couple of years, Wandile has been among the most visible proponents of matters relating to agricultural economics in print and social media. He is highly regarded by the agricultural and financial media and is a columnist for Business Day, Business Times, Huffington Post and Farmers' Weekly. In his spare time, he writes daily for his blog – Agricultural Economics Today. Through his online presence, he succeeds in raising awareness of the realities that impact producers and consumers on a fundamental level.

His influence and opinion can be seen in deliberations with the government, political organisations and institutions such as Bloomberg, the Reserve Bank and the European Union amongst others. He also advises on provincial agricultural strategic plans, the more recent being in the Eastern Cape. He was recently appointed on President Cyril Ramaphosa's advisory panel, who advises and supports the inter-ministerial committee on land reform.

## **Acknowledging an important role**

"Every day we are met with the challenge of feeding a growing world population. With these awards, Agricultural Writers SA acknowledges the role that farmers and agriculturists play in the agricultural sector and in addressing food security. I am sure that although we will not hear the words, future generations will thank you for your contributions and efforts to create an enabling environment that facilitated growth, success and food security in our lovely country," said Magda du Toit, chairperson of the Agricultural Writers SA.

"The ultimate measure of a person is not what they do in moments of comfort and convenience, but rather what they do during times of challenge and crisis. That shows resilience and that is the match that ignites hope, excellence, innovation and forward thinking. And that is what all our regional winners managed to do."