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KZN government gets tough on luxury estates

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The provincial government is worried about the steady loss of prime farming land in KwaZulu-Natal and has warned of a much tougher policy line against new golf courses, gated housing estates and other luxury developments which erode the future of agriculture.

Carlos Boldogh, Chief of Operations for the KZN department of agriculture and environmental affairs, told The Mercury that high value cropland was valuable because it covered just eight percent of the province.

Converting the best farming lands into luxury development projects could lead to a "perversion" of government strategy to return land to black communities.

Boldogh was responding to written questions on the proliferation of golf course housing estates and other top-end developments in some parts of the province, as well as recent policy moves by the Western Cape government to ensure stricter planning and environmental controls for such projects.

We have been losing huge amounts (of prime farm land) over the last few decades and are very reluctant to lose any more," he said, noting that pressure was particularly evident along the coast north of Durban and in parts of the Midlands.

His comments provoked an angry reaction from South African Property Owners' Association President TC Chetty, who said government policy in this area remained inconsistent and created uncertainty for developers.

Last month, inquiries by The Mercury suggested that at least nine golf course estates had been built, or were on the planning boards, between Umhlanga and Zinkwazi.

These included the Moreland group's showpiece Zimbali estates, the Elan group's Simbithi eco-estate/golf course, Prince's Grant and plans for a massive 4 000-unit coastal resort, golf course and equestrian centre at Blythedale Beach.

Boldogh said several new golf estates, equestrian, polo and fishing estates were built or planned on "high value, prime or unique agricultural land", and might also be environmentally unsustainable.

For example, studies in the Western Cape showed that some golf estates used huge quantities of water for irrigation.

"Secondly, they introduce artificial or speculative non-agricultural land value pressures to rural communities. This generates a number of ripple effects on surrounding farms that eventually weakens the economic sustainability of farming - that is 'pull' and 'push' factors that encourage and/or force the sale of farms through increased farm values, and resultant municipal rates and land taxes.

"This can in some cases result in an effective perversion of government's land reform strategy by effectively redistributing agricultural land to wealthy non-agricultural users."

Boldogh said the proliferation of such developments should be measured against recent national government policy plans to fast-track land redistribution and farming development, along with more support for black farmers and new farm settlements.

In the 1970s the previous government had voiced concern that South Africa's cropland (now only 13 percent) was being lost rapidly, and enacted a law to reverse the trend.

"Unfortunately, the loss of (prime) agricultural land has continued - in KZN there is only eight percent remaining."



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A recent government policy framework suggested that 30 percent of agricultural land had to be transferred to black ownership by 2014, with another 20 percent of prime and unique farm land made available on lease. Boldogh said that his department recognised the need to balance its concerns over agriculture against the need for development and economic growth targets.

"We will therefore very reluctantly stand in the way of environmentally sustainable investments that create significant numbers of jobs for the unemployed and poverty-stricken communities of our province."

Asked whether this meant that his department would lodge formal objections against new golf course estates and similar developments, Boldogh said: "If people say they want to put up a golf course in the Battlefields region (where there is little high-value farm land) we would not have a problem."

But if these developments were located on high-value agricultural land, such as the North Coast and KZN Midlands, then "we would lodge objections".

But Chetty said the government seemed to be targeting high-end property developments, while encouraging or turning a blind eye to low-income housing projects on land deemed to have high agricultural value.

"Government's land reform strategy by effectively redistributing agricultural land to wealthy non-agricultural users."

"How do we achieve economic growth targets if there is uncertainty and inconsistency in government policy? The recent statements on foreign ownership restrictions on land have added to the uncertainty.

"As developers we need to know where we stand so that if necessary we can look elsewhere." he said.