

**WORLDWIDE**  *fruit*

**Water Stewardship Case Studies**  
South Africa

**ICON**  
**FRUIT**

**Case Study 10:**  
**Elandsrivier Farming**

  
**BLUE NORTH**  
THINKING. FUTURE

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Worldwide Fruit Limited are investing in Water Stewardship across their supply-base and will be presenting Water Stewardship case studies from supplying farms over the next 12 months. Their aim is to raise awareness of the challenges that South African growers deal with on a daily basis. Water management challenges and the solutions implemented to overcome them will be explored, but we will also see how growers are driving ongoing good management of water resources. Apart from water, case studies will also look at current sustainability strategies implemented and plans for improving sustainability into the future.



## Case study 10: Elandsrivier Farming (Icon Fruit)

- Case study 9: Vadersgawe Farm (Delecta)
- Case study 8: Boplaas 1743 Landgoed (Core fruit)
- Case study 7: Waterford Farm (TFFG)
- Case study 6: Morgenzon Farm (Rubisco)
- Case study 5: Cerasus Farming (Stems)
- Case study 4: Dreem Fruit (Delecta)
- Case study 3: De Keur
- Case study 2: Dennegeur Farms
- Case study 1: Boomerang Fruits

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# Summary

Elandsrivier Farming is situated in the Warm Bokkeveld region, close to Ceres, in South Africa's Western Cape province. Elandsrivier is a third-generation family farm established in 1969, and they currently cultivate 135ha of peaches, nectarines, apples, pears and apricots. Social initiatives at Elandsrivier Farming include an annual apricot picking day that is open to the public. All proceeds of the day go to Elandsrivier's Daycare Centre. Elandsrivier is also in partnerships with a group of previously disadvantaged farmers from the Nduli/Ceres community. They jointly own Thembelitsha Farming, a 230ha working farm that produces garlic, onions, nectarines & peaches. Elandsrivier Farming boasts WWF-SA Conservation Status as they played a key role in the establishment of the Waboomsberg Conservancy. Together with WWF, their goal is to eliminate alien vegetation and protect indigenous plants and animals, one of which is the critically endangered geometric tortoise occurring in the region. Water is a challenge for Elandsrivier Farming. They base many of their decisions on water and has a water budget and five-year plan for all new plantings. Due to concerns over water, they have decided to rather cultivate less hectares, but plant the right cultivars that bear quickly and are more profitable in the long run.



The entrance gate of Elandsrivier Farming, with an orchard in full bloom in the background.  
Photo: Carina Wessels

# About

Elandsrivier Boerdery is situated in the Warm Bokkeveld, surrounded by beautiful mountains in the picturesque Prince Alfred's Hamlet, which is close to Ceres. Elandsrivier is a third-generation family farm established in 1969. The current owner, Stefan Du Plessis, bought his brother's shares in the farm about 9 years ago. Stefan is also the Managing Director of Icon Fruit - a stone fruit export specialist. Icon Fruit aims to produce and supply the highest quality stone fruit, bringing together traditional varieties with new designer cultivars of plums, pluots, apricots, peaches, cherries, and nectarines.

Elandsrivier currently has about 135ha under production, with 60% stone fruit and 40% pome fruit. Traditionally they have been known for apricots and the drying of apricots, but Elandsrivier developed new and better nectarine orchards in the last decade. They now produce peaches, nectarines, apples, pears and apricots. Elandsrivier is also recognised for their own pear cultivar developed on farm, known as Cape Fire™. The company is one of the few farms in the region that still runs a fruit drying facility.

We had the privilege of meeting with Joubert Stemmet, Senior Production Manager at Elandsrivier Farming.

Meaning of Elandsrivier Boerdery:

- Eland - A large spiral horned African antelope
- Rivier - Afrikaans for river
- Boerdery - the Afrikaans word for farming



Elandsrivier's own pear cultivar, known as Cape Fire™.

Photo: Elandsrivier Farming



Joubert Stemmet, Senior Production Manager at Elandsrivier Farming. Photo: Carina Wessels

# Social Initiatives

## *Vyeboom Daycare*

Elandsrivier Farming holds an annual apricot picking day that is open to the public and all proceeds of the day go to the Vyeboom Daycare Centre. Vyeboom (Afrikaans for Figtree) Daycare was started on Elandsrivier in 2016. It is a daycare/nursery for pre-schoolers and aftercare for the school children of the farm workers. Currently 25 children between the ages of 0-18 years attend Vyeboom Daycare. Pre-schoolers follow the Amazing Brainz program and school children are assisted with their homework after school. In addition, they all get a healthy meal each day. Elandsrivier is currently in the process of raising funds for a computer room for the older children to use after school.



Vyeboom Daycare Centre at Elandsrivier Farming.  
Photo: Carina Wessels

## *Thembelitsha Farming*

Thembelitsha Farming is a 230ha working farm that produces garlic, onions, nectarines & peaches in the Warm Bokkeveld near Ceres. Thembelitsha was started in 2017 and is one of Icon Fruit's growers.

Thembelitsha was formerly known as Daytona - a failed land reform project sold to the government in the early 1990's. After failed attempts and individuals with conflicting views, Partners in Agri Land Solutions (PALS) presented an option to the previously disadvantaged group of beneficiaries to form a partnership with a commercial farmer. PALS approached eleven stakeholders from the Nduli/Ceres community and commercial farmer Stefan du Plessis from Elandsrivier farm. Together, the Nduli group decided their best chance of sustainably developing the farm was through the private sector and PALS. Elandsrivier now owns 49%, while the Nduli/Ceres community farmers own 51% of Thembelitsha, which means "new hope" in Xhosa. The Nduli people were all livestock farmers, so they wanted to go in that direction again, but the area lent itself to fruit production. Stefan du Plessis also has experience in fresh produce, so they decided to focus on fruit production instead. As a result, returns will take longer to see than in cattle, but they are all working together to make this new venture a success.

*Partners in Agri Land Solutions (PALS)* is a private sector initiative started in 2014 with the idea that a commercial farmer would take hands with an upcoming farmer and farmworkers also share in the profits. PALS initially launched in Ceres in 2015 and has since expanded nationally. The PALS framework represents a radical departure from past South African land-reform models. It is based on sound business principles, solid legal structures, mentorship, and training of emerging black farmers to become successful commercial farmers.

## Environmental & Other Initiatives

Elandsrivier Farming played a key role in the establishment of the Waboomsberg Conservancy and boasts WWF-SA Conservation Status. About six farms in the region form part of the Waboomsberg Conservancy and they hold regular meetings with WWF representatives in the region. Their goal is to eliminate alien vegetation and protect indigenous plants and animals that live in this unique climate, one of which is the critically endangered geometric tortoise.

The geometric tortoise occurs only in the low-lying renosterveld shrublands of the Swartland, Upper Breede River Valley and Ceres Valley, where wheat, wine, and fruit farming, as well as urban development, have led to the destruction of more than 90% of its habitat. A few years ago a geometric tortoise survey revealed a number of individuals on Elandsrivier Farming and since then Stefan du Plessis has been actively conserving natural habitat for these tortoises.



A geometric tortoise found on Elandsrivier Farming. Photo: Elandsrivier Farming

Elandsrivier Farming also work closely with AECI Plant Health, a South African Company with a range of products and services, such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) services, aimed at producing nutritious food sustainably. Some of the IPM practices Elandsrivier employ include mating disruption, and they have monitoring systems to help them apply chemicals judiciously.



Elandsrivier Farming makes use of solar panels as part of their sustainability strategy. Photo: Carina Wessels

# Climate Change & Water

Elandsrivier is traditionally a dry farm, so they have always had to work carefully with their water. The last season they received 133 mm less rain than the average of the last three years. “Water is absolutely a source of life for all of us. In this valley there are farms whose dams are overflowing. We are unfortunately not in that position. At this point I think we have just enough water to get through the season,” says Joubert Stemmet.

We asked Joubert if he thinks this reduction in rainfall is due to climate change, or whether it is just part of the natural cycles of the world: “My feeling is that global warming is playing a role. Even farmers in the Koue Bokkeveld who had enough water traditionally must now plan carefully”. Henri, Stefan du Plessis's father, told Joubert that in the past they never struggled to fill their dams. In the three years Joubert has been working on Elandsrivier he has not seen the dams completely full.

However, Joubert acknowledges that amidst the challenges with water, they certainly have advantages too. There are benefits to farming in a drier region with the climate Elandsrivier experiences. They are usually early in the market, some of their cultivars are ripe up to two weeks ahead of other farmers. Furthermore, because it is a dry region their fruits' sugars are also high, giving them a competitive advantage.



A water holding dam on Elandsrivier Farming in the foreground, with an orchard full of blossoms in the background. Photo: Carina Wessels

# Sustainable Water Management

Elandsrivier Farming receives their water from two schemes, the Ceres Koekedou and Rooikloof irrigation schemes. Water gravitates from these schemes to them, and they then pump the water to the orchards. They also get some runoff from the mountains in winter, and they have a couple of boreholes, however the borehole water is very brackish, and therefore they do not irrigate with it.

Water is the biggest challenge for Elandsrivier Farming. It's a large farm, more than 1000ha, however they only have enough water to cultivate 135ha. They used to cultivate more, however took out a couple of unproductive blocks in the past winter. With the water situation now, they will rather cultivate less hectares, but plant the right cultivars that bear quickly and are more profitable in the long run.

Elandsrivier Farming has a water budget and five-year plan for their new plantings. For example, they are planning to plant more early cultivars. If you plant only late cultivars, you can only harvest in March or April, and you need your water to last so much longer. "We make many of our decisions around water these days", says Joubert.

Elandsrivier uses a mixture between drip and micro irrigation. According to Joubert recent trends are more towards drip, but then one has to be fully automated, which they are not yet. All their new blocks run on the Mottech irrigation scheduling system, however they still have some 30 year old blocks that are not yet on the scheduling system.



Harvest time. Photo: Elandsrivier Farming

Other water management techniques at Elandsrivier include:

- the use of probes to monitor soil moisture
- irrigating at night to reduce evaporation
- composting and mulching
- cover crops in orchards

At Thembelitsha Farming they are now planting nectarines under nets and are hoping to see substantial benefits from it soon. These nectarines are self-pollinating, as bees do not do well under the nets. Future plans for Elandsrivier Farming also include installing nets over new orchards, as this could result in substantial water savings.



Workers busy pruning trees. The drip-line used for drip irrigation is visible under the trees, while cover crops can be seen in the rows. Photo: Carina Wessels



An orchard in full bloom on Elandsrivier Farming. Photo: Carina Wessels