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For Immediate Release

ARC - Unlocking the potential of the Honeybush Tea industry in South Africa

The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) continues to play a pivotal role in the establishment and growth of the honeybush tea industry through research and development since 1993. An event to celebrate the ARC's research achievements on honeybush was held this week in Stellenbosch, Western Cape. The highlight of the event was when Prof Lizette Joubert of the ARC, released the latest sensory wheels which highlight differences in aroma of individual honeybush species.

Prof Lizette Joubert and her team, have been responsible for product research, unlocking the potential of honeybush by unravelling its chemistry. This guided their efforts together with collaborators aimed at product development and improvement and understanding the health-promoting properties of honeybush. For more than 20 years the ARC has conducted honeybush tea research that lead to a major achievement of the release of commercial honeybush seeds to industry in 2013. More than 20kg was sold for commercial purposes and this saw the industry triple their commercial plantations to about 300ha.

"The reason for the success of the ARC honeybush tea research programme is not only due to dedicated ARC researchers, but most importantly the role of the collaborators, funders and other stakeholders" said Dr Cecilia Bester, ARC Senior Researcher.

Representatives from government and industry reinforced their commitment for collaborative support of this endemic herbal tea and its potential to become a vibrant industry. In her address on the importance of honeybush to the Western Cape, Ms Joyene Isaacs, Head of Department for Western Cape Agriculture said: "the development of honeybush as a commercial crop is a process of many years, with many role players and interested parties. Commercialization of this product presents an opportunity to explore other indigenous crops to the benefit of big and small industries". This was demonstrated through the launch of the World's first Honeybush-wooded wine by Western Cape MEC of Economic Opportunities, Mr Alan Winde.

Talking on the industry perspective of the role of the ARC, Mr Eugene Smith, Chairperson of the South African Honeybush Tea Association, said that "it will be arrogant to say that any industry consists of only one player that makes it successful, but it will be correct to say that the impact of the ARC on the Honeybush Tea industry was and still is massive. Without the ARC the Honeybush Tea industry would have been years behind from where it is today, and the industry would have been so much poorer. The role the ARC plays is crucial for the future success of the Honeybush Tea industry in South Africa."

The work done at the ARC also has a fundamental impact on communities. This was highlighted by Mr Sidney Le Fleur of the Ericaville community that has been working closely with the ARC. He said

that before the ARC was involved they had limited understanding on how to farm with honeybush. “We would work in trial and error. The ARC assisted with the introduction of a honeybush guidebook that helped with scientific and practical know-how”. Department of Science and Technology (DST) represented by Dr Hlupheka Chabalala, the Director of Indigenous Knowledge-based Technology Innovation echoed this by adding that “the DST interfaces indigenous knowledge systems within the Bio-Economy Strategy in order to directly address poverty, unemployment and inequality. The honeybush project offers best practices by demonstrating how science, technology and innovation positively impact the lives of the poor and marginalised.”

As indicated by the Finance Minister during his budget speech, promotion of agriculture and rural development remains a focal point for our government. That is because of its potential to support the achievement of some of the government’s key objectives of food security, poverty alleviation and job creation. Agriculture also features prominently in the National Development Plan, the country’s long term planning framework as well as the nine point plan of government. The negative economic climate which also affects the agricultural sector therefore requires innovative thinking and identification of new growth opportunities and outlets. Honeybush tea presents a very real opportunity to address the developmental priorities mentioned through its economic potential and growth prospects. A study commissioned by the Coega Development Corporation, on behalf of the Eastern Cape’s Department of Economic Development and Environmental Affairs and the South African Honeybush Tea Association concluded that the industry has the potential to grow from an annual average of 150 tons of tea processed to 1 500 tons, thereby increasing its annual turnover from R10-million (US\$124 000) to R100-million (\$12.4 million). The results of ARC’s research work have a potential to develop this crop to support job creation throughout its value chain including associated industries including the honeybush wooded wine example already mentioned.

Honeybush tea is a young, but growing industry that is unique to South Africa. The tea is naturally caffeine free and rich in antioxidants. Honeybush tea grows in the wetter Eastern Cape mountains and spreads down along the Langeberg and Swartberg mountains into the Western Cape.

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Notes to the Editors

About the Agricultural Research Council

The Agricultural Research Council is a premier science institution that conducts research with partners, develops human capital and foster innovation in support of the agricultural sector. The ARC provides diagnostic, laboratory, analytical, agricultural engineering services, post-harvest technology development, agrochemical evaluation, consultation and advisory services, food processing technology services as well as various surveys and training interventions. For more information visit the ARC website at: www.arc.agric.za