Govt decision to allow wheat imports threatens production

By Fridah Zinyama

ZAMBIA National Farmers Union (ZNFW) has said its earlier projections of 190,000 metric tonnes of wheat production are under threat owing to the government’s decision to allow imports of the commodity.

And the Agricultural Cooperative Farm (ACF) has revealed that it had advised the government to import maize early enough because demand for the commodity had increased last year.

Meanwhile, Zambian Agricultural Commodities Exchange (ZAMACE) executive director Brian Tembo has questioned why the government has not considered neither maize which the vast majority of people can afford as the country’s staple source of food.

ZNFU had last year projected that the country would produce about 190,000 metric tonnes of wheat which was enough to almost satisfy the national requirement of 200,000 metric tonnes.

In an interview, ZNFU president Kevin Zamba said commercial farmers who were using the 90,000 metric tonnes of wheat would not be able to plant next crop because of difficulties in raising finances.

“At the rate we are going, unless the wheat stock is sold before the end of March, most farmers will not be able to afford to plant the new crop,” he said.

But the Farmers Association of Lusaka (BAL) has stated that commercial wheat farmers had themselves to blame for being stuck with 85,000 metric tonnes of wheat which would make it difficult to sell on the local market as they always pegged it at exorbitant prices.

Last week, commercial wheat farmers complained that the government’s decision to allow wheat imports into the country before the crop marketing season had led to them being stuck with more than 85,000 metric tonnes of the commodity which they had failed to sell on the local market.

BAL, however, stated that local wheat farmers were being left for maize and barley access across the country and that they had sold their wheat at the same price as imported wheat.

“The farmers are including transport costs in their prices of local wheat which is very unfair as they do not incur the same costs as imported wheat,” the association argued.

BAL further added that the decision by the Millers Association of Zambia (MAGA) to increase the cost of flour by K40.00 would lead to more hikes in flour products such as bread.

“As bakers, we will also be compelled to increase the cost of our products which is in going to disadvantage the consumers,” stated BAL.

But MAGA vice-chairman Peter Corns had said they had been forced to increase flour prices by K10.00 across the board because of the depreciation of the kwacha against the US dollar.

Corns added that the farmers were selling wheat in dollars so it was proving expensive for millers to purchase.

“There is no way you can now say that they are selling their products in dollars whilst other farmers are selling theirs in kwacha,” he said. “It is futile and government should urgently look into solving this problem.”

But Zambia National Farmers Union (ZNFW) president Kevin Zamba said the need for farmers to sell their wheat in dollars, saying farmers recouped production costs in dollars hence the need for them to recoup their money in the foreign currency.

Meanwhile, the ACF in its report on Food Security Research project for Zambia prepared last year, revealed that Zambia’s official food balance sheet appeared to have underestimated the demand for maize this year.

“That is why we advised government to consider importing maize into the country early in order to avoid competition for transport with other countries looking for maize,” the report read.

ACF observed that late harvesting coupled with the more extreme pattern of widespread hunger in local communities resulted in the need for imports.

Most parts of the country have been hit by post-harvest food shortages which could have been avoided had the government made a quick decision to import maize into the country before demand for the commodity increased in the region.

And Tembo said the only way to solve the maize shortages in the country was for the government to open and encourage increased production.

“The long-term solution to the maize shortage on the market is not the 35,000 metric tonnes which government is producing but rather the non-genetically modified organism maize which is being imported into the country,” Tembo said.

“The solution lies with government coming up with better measures and policies that will allow more people to get involved into maize production in the country.”

Tembo said once maize production was increased and local demand satisfied, farmers could then be allowed to export the excess maize to neighbouring countries.

“Government could further liberalize the agricultural commodities marketing and trading sector and allow for exports in due course,” said Tembo. “The availability of a market will further encourage farmers to produce maize.”