

**“Running twice as fast while remaining  
in the same position”: Settler wheat production in  
Southern Rhodesia, c.1928–1965**

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**Introduction**

While it is a truism that the polity cannot live on bread alone, the state has long recognised it as a mainstay of a satisfied and therefore quiescent citizenry. A hungry populace is a dangerous populace. Yet feeding a nation is not an easy endeavour. In 2012, Zimbabwe harvested a paltry 41 000 tonnes of its 400 000 to 450 000 tonnes of national requirement for wheat.<sup>1</sup> Though this was an improvement on the 2011 national output, estimated at 23 000 tonnes, the country’s burgeoning import bill remains a cause for concern.<sup>2</sup> During that period, 110 910 metric tonnes were imported from countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Russia and Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, discussions among the country’s agricultural policymakers have for the most part mainly centred on the unprofitability of local wheat production and the merits of concentrating on export crops such as tobacco and cotton in order to generate foreign exchange with which to purchase wheat in global markets. Answers to this widening gap between wheat supply and demand have been sought for more than a century but the lack of historical knowledge on how this historical conundrum has been dealt with is astounding.<sup>4</sup> Even although various aspects of colonial administration in Southern Rhodesia, including land policy, the development of settler agriculture, politics, labour, mining, native policy and urban geography have received a good measure of historical attention, “bread and butter” issues have surprisingly escaped this attention.<sup>5</sup> M. Rukuni et al.’s

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1. N. Chenga, “Winter Wheat Doomed”, *Financial Gazette*, 22 June 2012.
2. “Zimbabwe: Grain and Feed Annual Report”, Draft by the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, 13 January 2012, p 5.
3. “Zimbabwe: Grain and Feed Annual Report”, p 6.
4. See T.S. Jayne, M. Chisvo, M. Rukuni and P. Masanganise, “Zimbabwe’s Food Insecurity Paradox: Hunger amid Potential”, in M. Rukuni, P. Tawonezwi and C. Eicher (eds), *Zimbabwean Agricultural Revolution Revisited* (UZ Publications, Harare, 2006), pp 525–541.
5. See H. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1923* (University of Rhodesia, Salisbury, 1972); R. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (Heinemann, London, 1977); R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977); I.R. Phimister, “Meat and Monopolies: Beef Cattle in Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1938”, *Journal of African History*, 19, 3, 1978, pp 391–414; V.E.M. Machingaidze, *The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia with Particular Reference to the Role of the State: 1908–193*, PhD thesis, University of London, 1980; I. Phimister, *An Economic History of Zimbabwe, 1890–1948: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle* (Longman,

*Zimbabwe Agricultural Revolution Revisited* investigates agricultural concerns in the country since colonial occupation but fails to tackle the wheat question in its 32 chapters, and yet wheat is the colony's second most important staple crop after maize.<sup>6</sup> Where wheat is mentioned, it is in passing as scholars make generalised conclusions that do not take into account the unique dynamics of wheat production. The common narrative on settler agriculture is that in the 1920s, the local agricultural market was becoming too small to absorb local produce; that the production of each crop was faced with overproduction; and that during the Second World War, there was a change from conditions of surplus production to one of shortages.<sup>7</sup> In addition, D. Dunlop generalises that there was a marked increase in agricultural output during the period 1945 – 1965.<sup>8</sup>

This argument, although convincing at a macro level, has distinct weaknesses at a micro level because as will be shown in this study, there were no fundamental changes in the wheat position between 1928 and 1965. Recently, presentist approaches to agrarian studies put the blame entirely on the country's current predicament as an outcome of land reform and economic challenges facing the country since the turn of the century.<sup>9</sup> Concomitant to this view is the fallacy that Southern Rhodesia started growing wheat after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965 when the illegal Ian Smith regime was hit by sanctions.<sup>10</sup> Given this, this article attempts to explain how and why Southern Rhodesian efforts in producing wheat prior to 1965 were a failure.

With a settler population consisting mainly of European-born whites who struggled to adopt tropical food tastes, questions about food production began to be asked soon after occupation and grew simultaneously with

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London, 1987); S.C. Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed: A History of Tobacco Farming and Labour in Colonial Zimbabwe 1890–1945* (Ohio Centre of International Studies, Athens, 1998); N. Samasuwo, "Food Production and War Supplies: Rhodesia's Beef Industry during the Second World War, 1939–1945", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29, 2, 2003; W. Wolmer, *From Wilderness Vision to Farm Invasions: Conservation and Development in Zimbabwe's South East Lowveld* (Currey, Oxford, 2007).

6. Rukuni, Tawonezwi and Eicher (eds), *Zimbabwean Agricultural Revolution Revisited*.
7. See H. Weinmann, "Agricultural Research and Development in Southern Rhodesia: 1924–50," *Series in Science*, No. 2, University of Rhodesia, Salisbury, 1975. See also R. Palmer, "The Agricultural History of Rhodesia", in Palmer and Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty*.
8. H. Dunlop, "The Development of European Agriculture in Rhodesia: 1945–1965", Department of Economics, Paper 5 (University of Rhodesia, Salisbury, 1971); M. Rukuni, "The Evolution of Zimbabwe's Agricultural Policy: 1890–1990", in M. Rukuni and C.K. Eicher (eds), *Zimbabwean Agricultural Revolution* (UZ, Harare, 1994).
9. See D. Moore, "Is the Land the Economy and the Economy the Land?", *Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 19, 2, 2001, pp 253–266; B. Kingsley, "Land Reform, Growth and Equity: Emerging Evidence from Zimbabwe's Resettlement Programme", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25, 2, 1999, p 173–196.
10. O. Chifamba and E. Chikwati, "Zimbabwe: Wheat Production Declines, High Costs Cited", *The Herald*, 2 October 2012.

capitalist development in the territory.<sup>11</sup> For instance, there was a large inflow of mostly English-speaking immigrants from South Africa between 1901 and 1911 from 11 000 to over 23 000.<sup>12</sup> The cosmopolitan nature of the settler population meant that there were complicated interests, relations and alliances across the political and class divide but like their counterparts in other African settler colonies, they sought to reproduce certain patterns of Western institutions and culture.<sup>13</sup> Despite never forming a homogenous whole, Southern Rhodesian settlers maintained a firm faith in their country, as shown by Gann who states that “white Rhodesians ... stuck to their belief that however many setbacks their country might suffer, prosperity was nevertheless waiting around the corner”.<sup>14</sup> Away from the sentimental value of wheat, administrators had pressing economic fundamentals of supply and demand to grapple with. Besides meeting local demand, the promotion of wheat production was linked to the desire to enter the lucrative world market as was the promotion of beef and tobacco industries.<sup>15</sup> It is against this background that the struggle for autarky in wheat as a response to the growing demand for wheat and wheaten products, at first by the settler community and later as a result of increased urbanisation of the African population, will be discussed.

The attitude of the settler farmers towards wheat production was at first non-committal. Even though wheat was part of their diet, as a cash crop it was unpopular and as such, was taken to be an aside crop to be farmed in winter when most crops such as tobacco were out of season. In supporting it as a winter crop, the state argued that farmers could contribute to the national wheat stock by using tobacco stumps as green manure, and so have an extra source of revenue. However, prior to 1928 efforts by the state to kick start wheat production were in vain. In fact, ideal conditions for wheat production, which existed in certain parts of the Union of South Africa, especially in the Cape Province, did not exist in Southern Rhodesia. Areas such as the Transvaal and Orange Free State, which are also subtropical, faced disease problems similar to those in Southern Rhodesia.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, experiments carried out at Salisbury in 1917 were inconclusive. New trials on summer wheat carried out in 1927/28 gave good results from two varieties, namely Quality and Kenya Governor, which yielded 9 bags per

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11. European nationalities that settled in Southern Rhodesia included Britons, Germans, Poles, Greeks, Yugoslavians, Swedes, Swiss, Lithuanians and Czechoslovakians. See A.S Mlambo, “A History of Zimbabwean Migration to 1990”, in J. Crush and D. Tevera (eds), *Zimbabwe's Exodus: Crisis, Migration, Survival*, (SAMP, Cape Town, 2010), pp 52–76.
  12. Mlambo, “A History of Zimbabwean Migration to 1990”, p 55.
  13. See S.L. Morgensen, “The Bio-politics of Settler Colonialism: Right here, Right now”, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1, 2011, pp 52–76; A. Selby, “Commercial Farmers and the State: Interest Group Politics and Land Reform in Zimbabwe”, PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2006.
  14. L.H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1934* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1965), p 316.
  15. See Phimister, “Meat and Monopolies”; and Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*.
  16. *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa, 3rd edition* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1937), p 563.

acre on heavily manured soil.<sup>17</sup> Since prior to that season, wheat had not yielded more than 5 bags per acre, these results triggered the hope that wheat could be produced on a large scale.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, a wheat breeder was appointed in 1928 to lead the struggle for wheat self-sufficiency.

Given that until 1928 the dominating factors on the choice of crops were the availability of export markets and high prices, wheat production had not received government prioritisation. Relatively high prices existed for tobacco, beef and maize hence wheat, not being an export crop, was sidelined. Besides that, unlike wheat, tobacco research was financed mainly by growers, such that the diversion of funds by the Agricultural Department to other crops was difficult.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, having regard to the importance of tobacco both to the agricultural sector and to the economy as a whole,

... it is doubtful whether a reduction in the tobacco research could have been justified and also the high priority placed on maize is understandable given the cheapness to produce it as well as the high cost of imported supplies during the inter-war period.<sup>20</sup>

One scholar has seen this prioritisation as emanating from the organisation of the world capitalist system. Mvundura argues that the failure of the smaller agricultural industries was due to lack of “Imperial encouragement” except during the Second World War.<sup>21</sup> He further states that since the settler economies operated within parameters designed and determined by British imperialism; maize, tobacco and beef production came to dominate. With regard to wheat the situation was different. In fact the major motivation for wheat production was to meet local demand. The colonial state did not need “Imperial encouragement” to promote its struggle for wheat self-sufficiency. More importantly, the dominating factors were availability of markets and high prices rather than “Imperial encouragement”.

By 1928, the wheat import bill had become very acute hence the realisation that if nothing was done a crisis was inevitable. The hitherto unheard voices of bureaucrats grappling with the troublesome wheat import bill had a favourable response from the colonial state as tobacco suffered from economic depression on the international market. That wheat could be produced in winter when most crops were out of season was an added advantage because it would not interfere with other agricultural activities. The colony’s balance of wheat trade over a three year period (1927–1930) as shown in Figure 1 below, reveals Southern Rhodesia’s dependence on wheat imports.

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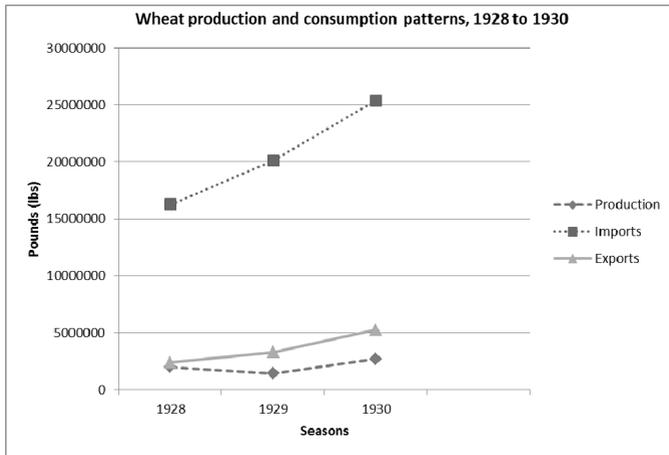
17. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 56.

18. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 56.

19. Machingaidze, “The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture”.

20. Dunlop, *The Development of European Agriculture*, p 28.

21. A. Mvundura, “Sheep Farming in Zimbabwe: 1905–85”, BA Economic History dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1987, p 5.



**Figure 1:** Wheat production and consumption<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the state's campaign for wheat self-sufficiency fitted very well into the euphoria of the time, occurring as it did just after the attainment of responsible government status in 1923. In the interest of the state, reliance on outside sources for wheat and wheaten products was not revered as it was a stain on the conceptualisation of modernity and greatness espoused by the state.<sup>23</sup> Southern Rhodesia's decision to turn to wheat self-sufficiency was not without regional precedence as South Africa was during this time also pursuing a similar policy.<sup>24</sup>

However, such an ambitious project could not take off as long as economic conditions were unfavourable. It was not until the crash of the tobacco industry as a result of the onset of the Great Depression in the 1927–28 season that the views of the bureaucrats for the first time coincided with those of the farmers who were anxious to recoup their losses by venturing into any protected industry such as the wheat industry. The marketing problems existing in the agricultural sector at large and tobacco industry in particular provided a perfect setting for launching this ambitious programme. Once the viability of the tobacco industry became doubtful, the government quickly turned to other crops including wheat. It was in this spirit that in 1929 the Hillside Experimental Station, which had been opened in 1924 for tobacco research, shifted its focus to wheat and other crops.<sup>25</sup> The impact of this new initiative was instantaneous, albeit short-lived, because it

22. National Archives Zimbabwe (hereafter NAZ), S1265/C2/1, Wheat Conference, 1931.
23. See T. Mafukidze, "Towards inevitable conflict: an examination of the political effect of the 1923 award of internal self-government to the colony of Southern Rhodesia", M.A. Thesis, Duquesne University, 1973.
24. J.M. Tinley, *South African Food and Agriculture in World War 2* (Stanford University Press, California, 1954), p 50.
25. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 56.

ignited the hope that the crop could indeed be produced commercially. As tobacco farmers fled from the scourge of depressed markets, there was a simultaneous fall in the percentage share of tobacco on Southern Rhodesian exports: while tobacco exports of the years 1926, 1927 and 1928 were valued at 26.5; 46.4; and 42.7 percent of the value of all agricultural exports, they represented only 17 and 17.4 percent in 1929 and 1930 respectively.<sup>26</sup>

### **Most promising years, 1928–1939**

The decision to promote wheat coincided with changes in land ownership and control dynamics because of the passage of the Land Apportionment Act (1930). This Act resulted in the shift of all prime lands into settler hands and in the process fundamentally changed, albeit temporarily, wheat prospects.<sup>27</sup> Approximately 60 000 Africans were moved off European land during the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> Besides availing settler farmers with rich lands, the government introduced measures meant to avoid the marketing problems in the wheat industry. Indeed, the collapse of the tobacco industry had aptly demonstrated that any local industry needed to be shielded from external pressures. It was, therefore, not surprising that the wheat industry was protected from falling prices by a pricing agreement entered into between the government and wheat traders in early 1928, stipulating that the wheat traders should pay a fixed price of 28s per bushel until 1931.<sup>29</sup> The impact of these interventions did not take long to manifest. By 1933, wheat production had risen considerably, resulting in a temporary change in the proportion of local wheat in flour from one in every four to one in every two of imported wheat.<sup>30</sup>

With these promising developments, the settler state offered every encouragement and assistance to farmers to expand wheat production. To mount and sustain this struggle for increased wheat production required the full-time services of a wheat breeder. Accordingly, from 1934, when tobacco research was shifted to Trelawney, wheat breeding and selection for the first time in the colony's history continued at Hillside under the supervision of a qualified wheat breeder, T.K Sansom.<sup>31</sup> Research and the development of high yielding variables suitable for local conditions continued and under the leadership of Sansom, progress was also made in determining ways and means of overcoming problems such as weeds, especially in respect of summer wheat.

However, it also became apparent very early that the government's task would not be achieved without sponsoring enthusiastic, prospective

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26. Machingaidze, "The Development of Settler Capitalist Agriculture, p 183.

27. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination*, p 223.

28. Palmer, *Land and Racial Domination*, p 223.

29. NAZ, S482/781/1939/1, Maize, Wheat, Grain: 1923–1941, Confidential Minute of the Imperial Economic Commission on Wheat, 20 April 1931.

30. NAZ, S482/781/1939/1, Maize, Wheat, Grain: 1923–1941, Minutes of a meeting of the Buyers, Wheat Growers and Government, 10 November 1933.

31. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 10.

wheat farmers. The arousing of public conscience during the depression was not difficult because the provision of funds made it attractive to some bankrupt ex-tobacco farmers. Wheat farmers, like tobacco, maize and beef farmers, benefited from government financial support in the form of loans. These loans were secured with easy terms, usually the next year's crop.<sup>32</sup> On a broader perspective, the state availed agricultural finance from the Land Bank to the tune of over £1million in 1934 and there was a three year moratorium on all instalments for farms.<sup>33</sup> From 1935–36, a 50 percent subsidy was introduced and technical support was launched to allow settler farmers to build soil and undertake conservation work. As a result of this assistance, 5 022 new dams had been built on white-owned farms by 1950.<sup>34</sup>

One challenge which both the government and wheat farmers faced was that the farmers were scattered throughout the country and so were producing wheat under different agro-ecological conditions. The major wheat growing areas were the Charter, Chilimanzi, Melsester, Hartley, Umtali and Mazoe districts. This meant that the development of a wheat variety suitable for the entire country was difficult. However, the fact that the state took wheat production seriously can be demonstrated by its preparedness to work with individual farmers in any part of the country who showed interest in this crop. This is appropriately illustrated by its 1931 agreement with an Enkeldoorn farmer, C.W. Lamprecht, under which the latter was supplied with all seeds and fertilisers for the production of *vlei*<sup>35</sup> wheat. The results were disappointing, partly because of the poor rainfall recorded in the 1930–31 rain season which left insufficient moisture in the soil; and the tremendous heat during the month of May dried the soil too quickly.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, this experiment did not provide conclusive results on the production of *vlei* wheat across the territory. Information arising out of experiments at Lamprecht's farm was only helpful to other farmers in his district but not to those in regions whose agro-ecological conditions were different.

There were also some farmers who mandated themselves to produce wheat for local consumption and genuinely believed in the idea of self-sufficiency in wheat. Reuben Rademeyer was a classic example of the colony's enthusiastic wheat farmers. He carried out experiments at his farm in the Melsester District which demonstrated that wheat could be grown on land where there was prevailing mist from between six weeks to two months of the wheat growing period.<sup>37</sup> His findings came as a surprise to the

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32. Rubert, *A Most Promising Weed*, p 23–24.

33. Rubert, *A Most Promising weed*, p 23–24.

34. Rubert, *A Most Promising weed*, p 23–24.

35. *Vleis* are moisture retaining soils (wetlands). Similar experiments were also carried out at Raubenheimer's farm in 1934. Like the 1931 experiments the Raubenheimer experiments were to a greater extent a failure.

36. NAZ, S1215/1225/3, Winter Cereal Demonstration, Letter from a farmer, Lamprecht - D.M. MacLaughlin, 9 October 1931.

37. NAZ, S482/781/1939/1, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–1941, Letter from Rademeyer - the Prime Minister, 30 March 1931.

agricultural scientists, such that his letter was circulated from one department to another in search of ideas. However, agricultural experts, particularly the head of the Division of Plant Industry, dismissed Rademeyer's findings, arguing that in most cases this form of wheat culture had failed. Nonetheless, they concluded that the type of soil, variety and date of sowing were reasons for success at Rademeyer's farm.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, the available archival material does not reveal whether this farmer continued producing wheat under persistently "cloudy" conditions.

Having found Rademeyer's findings impracticable across the country, the state diverted its attention to irrigated wheat.<sup>39</sup> The results were very encouraging. For instance in 1932, wheat acreage topped 14 172 acres, a rise from 8 669 acres in 1931, while the most notable feature was the increase of irrigated land resulting in the rise in average output per acre from 2.3 bags in 1931 to 3 bags in 1932.<sup>40</sup> As the number of wheat farmers increased, certain areas began to lay claim to the title of wheat regions. Charter District became the principal wheat growing centre with 4 864 acres of which 4 110 acres were under wet vleis and 754 under irrigation, followed by Melsetter with 1 625 acres of which 1 327 were irrigated.<sup>41</sup>

All these developments translated into increased wheat output relative to the pre-1928 period. There had been 212 settler wheat farmers on 3 272 acres with an output of 7 000 bags in 1928; but in 1939 this had risen to 531 growers on 22 000 acres, with an output of 58 000 bags.<sup>42</sup> With such a promising picture, the agriculture officials were quick to forecast that wheat self-sufficiency would be achieved by the early 1940s. The increase in the number of wheat farmers was seen as an indicator that a viable wheat industry could be established. This increase was accompanied by a rapid expansion of the acreage given to wheat as well as output, especially in 1933, 1936 and 1939. Nonetheless, the country's needs continued to outstrip local production, partly because except for a few who produced about 12.5 bags per acre, the national average was pegged at 2.55 bags.<sup>43</sup>

However, the rise in the number of wheat farmers was not necessarily accompanied by increased output per acre. With all this investment and milestones reached, in comparative terms, wheat remained an "aside" crop because it did not come anywhere near the major crops (tobacco and maize) in terms of overall national output. When the positive developments of the 1930s are juxtaposed with consumption patterns, the reality is that

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38. NAZ, S482/781/1939/1, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–1941, Letter from Chief of Division of Plant Industry - Prime Minister, 14 April 1931.
  39. See G. Turck, "Wheat Irrigation and Economics", *Modern Farming*, October 1963.
  40. NAZ, S1216/SC64/122/6, Wheat Bushel Weights, 1933, Minutes of the Conference held on 8 February 1933 between Rhodesia Wheat Growers' Association (hereafter RWGA), Millers and the Government.
  41. NAZ, S1216/SC64/122/6, Wheat Bushel Weights, 1933, Minutes of the Conference, 8 February 1933.
  42. D.E. McLaughlin, "Wheat Production in Southern Rhodesia," *Rhodesian Agricultural Journal*, 113, 1939, p 1.
  43. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 56.

these did not tilt the balance in favour of the settler government. Undoubtedly, the government's principal achievement during the late 1920s and 1930s was its creation of an awareness of the need for the wheat industry to produce more in the national interest. This resulted in the genuine growth of the farmers' desire to increase wheat production.

### **War and wheat production, 1939–1945**

By 1939, the state appeared to have established a solid foundation for the production of wheat under tropical conditions. However, a myriad of challenges emanating from the war threatened to derail the pre-war gains, and the overall goal of wheat self-sufficiency. During the Second World War, Southern Rhodesia was used as a training ground for the Royal Air Force, and as a refugee camp for war internees comprising mainly Italian prisoners of war. In particular, the early months of the war saw the influx of approximately 15 000 Royal Air Training personnel.<sup>44</sup> In addition, there was a rise in the urban African labour force which, among other things, further increased domestic wheat consumption. All these issues and other related challenges resulted in the reduction of wheat acreage from over 20 000 acres in 1939, to 12 600 acres in 1946.<sup>45</sup> Failure to improve production coupled with shipping difficulties compromised the quality of wheat and wheaten products in Southern Rhodesia. Large numbers of consumers found it difficult to secure sufficient quality bread. As a result, there was a flood of complaints sent to the bakers over the wartime bread. The following letter sent to the Osborne Bakery (Pvt. Ltd) illustrates this:

With the war time bread you have to eat it on the same day as it goes bad easily. On the second day, you cannot even make pudding with it. The monthly account for two people has increased by 2/6 as much on account of waste. Why must we eat bread like this and send our flour to Northern Rhodesia. Do we owe it to them? Bread is the staff of life where school children come in. Something must be done on the matter. Will eating this bread help to win the war?<sup>46</sup>

Most affected by the war were the research activities of the Agriculture Department which as shown in the previous section, had been responsible for increased wheat production in the 1930s. The department lost valuable personnel to the war effort resulting in only 30–40 percent of its 260 officers being on active service.<sup>47</sup> In turn, this affected administrative and technical assistance to wheat farmers. Furthermore, the war coincided with unstable rainfall patterns. The seasons after the 1942 drought were

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44. See N.W. Samasuwo, "There is Something Special about Cattle": Towards an Economic History of the Beef Industry in Colonial Zimbabwe with Special Reference to the Role of the State, 1939 to 1980", PhD thesis, UCT, 2000, p 54; R. Blake, *A History of Rhodesia* (Eyre & Methuen, London, 1977).

45. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 57.

46. NAZ, S3574/1/158, Subsidy on Wheat, Correspondence and Memoranda, 1937–43, Letter from an anonymous customer - Osborn Bakery, undated.

47. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development, 1924–50*, p 3.

characterised by insufficient rainfall, hence wheat acreage declined from over 20 000 acres in 1939 to 12 600 in 1946.<sup>48</sup>

During this time, wheat production was severely affected by seed wheat shortages. The case of one Umtali wheat farmer, C. Pellate, vividly illustrates how serious these challenges were. Writing to the Secretary of Agriculture, Pellate reported his failure to find any seed wheat of whatever quality in Umtali and indicated that the prices quoted by Salisbury merchants were prohibitive.<sup>49</sup> Following this letter, McLaughlin, the Secretary of Agriculture, wrote to the Rhodesia Wheat Growers' Association (RWGA) on the need for the formation of a seed wheat association, and lamented that, "as usual no reliable seed will be obtainable at planting time and the chances are that the farmers will be buying their commercial wheat at a higher price than 22/6d per bag for seed purposes."<sup>50</sup> To Pellate, he did not have any good answer for he wrote: "At present there is a shortage of seed wheat ... I do not know of any growers having seed wheat for sale except Mr Morkel of Shamva."<sup>51</sup> The response received from the RWGA was that none of its members had seed wheat.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the farmers had to obtain seeds from distant places increased their operating costs and for the less capitalised, the solution was to use grain from previous yields.

Even though labour had always been a problem affecting agriculture and mining in the colony, this worsened during the war which witnessed the development of a manufacturing industry.<sup>53</sup> Given that wheat production amounted to a series of labour intensive activities (ploughing, weeding, green manuring, harvesting and threshing), it is imperative to show how shortages affected the industry. Indeed, wartime experiences by settler wheat farmers were not homogenous because labour shortages came relatively earlier in some districts. For example, in response to a request by the RWGA in 1941, the Native Commissioner (hereafter NC) for Umvuma wrote:

In Chilimanzi District a large number of natives are busy reaping and threshing their own wheat ... it is estimated that about 500 local natives are employed on the Air Force grounds in Gwelo District as well as 230 local natives on the Italian refugee camp construction at Umvuma. This work is taking longer than I was made to believe in the first place and necessitated an "indaba" yesterday afternoon to persuade the large number who asked to be signed off to remain at work there for a couple of months longer by which time it is hoped that work would be completed. A number of Road

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48. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development, 1924–50*, p 3.

49. NAZ, S1215/1220/9, Seed Wheat Growers Association, Letter from C. Pellate (Umtali wheat grower) - Secretary of Agriculture, 6 April 1939.

50. NAZ, S1215/1220/9, Seed Wheat Growers Association, Secretary of Agriculture - RWGA, 9 April 1939.

51. NAZ, S1215/1220/9, Seed Wheat Growers Association, Secretary of Agriculture - Pellate, 9 April 1939.

52. NAZ, S1215/1220/9, Seed Wheat Growers Association, Letter from RWGA - Secretary of Agriculture, 8 April 1939.

53. See A.S. Mlambo, "From the Second World War to UDI, 1940–1965", in B. Raftopoulos and A. Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008* (Weaver Press, Harare, 2009).

Department natives who were helping at the camp are now being taken back to the Roads.<sup>54</sup>

Contrary to this, the NC Gutu reported that wheat growers in Beatrice, Chatsworth and Enkeldoorn were turning back applicants for work. In Enkeldoorn, G.R. Zambara, of Kanameekgate farm, wrote to the NC: "I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter for which I have to thank you, but I am yes (sic) fenish (sic) with my cutting. So I need no more boys (sic) I will rember (sic) this nex (sic) year."<sup>55</sup> The NC Enkeldoorn wrote:

There has not been a shortage of labour [wheat] for that purpose [reaping] here. In this and Chilimanzi District large numbers of women and girls turn out at reaping and help with the wheat crop. It has been our experience in the past that the only people who experience difficulty in obtaining natives for reaping are those who have been unfair to natives for reaping in the past years. Many native men, to whom regular work does not appeal, turn out to assist during wheat harvesting as the work period is short and wages good.<sup>56</sup>

Wheat farmers who used female labour killed two birds with one stone. In addition to offsetting the apparent shortages of male labour, female labour was cheaper. The price controller acknowledged this fact when he reported that, "the low cost during the war years were probably due to the replacement of male staff by female staff wherever possible".<sup>57</sup>

In areas facing labour shortages, the state intervened in order to ensure wheat production. As already noted, most wheat farmers were people who were still trying to establish themselves following their harsh experiences during the Depression, many were small producers who could not afford mechanised agriculture. Very few wheat growers owned combine harvesters and threshers. For instance, the only threshing machine available in Enkeldoorn District belonged to a Mr Brits, who had not finished paying instalments for its purchase and, thus, risked losing it to debt collectors.<sup>58</sup> Brits could not increase charges for his services in order to clear his debt without facing the wrath of the law because this was at a time when the government controlled all prices for agricultural crops and services. This situation cast a shadow of doubt on the wheat farmers, who in the spirit of war effort, had increased their acreage but with no thresher, they faced an uncertain future.<sup>59</sup> What saved Brits was the importance of his thresher in a district where no other wheat farmer possessed one, and that

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54. NAZ, S482/789/39/2, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–41, Letter from the Native Commissioner (hereafter NC) Umvuma - Secretary of Native Affairs, 10 October 1941.
  55. NAZ, S482/789/39/2, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–41, Letter from G.R. Zambara to NC Gutu, 13 October 1941.
  56. NAZ, S482/789/39/2, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–41, Letter from NC Enkeldoorn to the Chief Native Commissioner (hereafter CNC), 16 October 1941.
  57. NAZ, S87/3, Wheat and Flour, Letter from Price Controller - Secretary of the Food Production Committee (hereafter FPC), 13 January 1954.
  58. NAZ, S482/789/39/2, Maize, Wheat and Grain: 1923–41, Letter from NC Enkeldoorn - CNC, 16 October 1941.
  59. NAZ, S955/293/1/2, Wheat Subsidies and Prices: 1943–46, Letter from M.F. Brits - Secretary of FPC, 10 December 1942.

the country could ill afford to lose the little it produced. The government, under a special clause, allowed him to increase his charges. Elsewhere, whereas in 1941, Gutu District had not complained of labour shortages, by 1943 the situation was precarious. The secretary of the Gutu Farmers Association wrote, "In reply to a broadcast by one member of my Association for forty wheat cutters just over a month ago, he has had only one applicant for a job".<sup>60</sup> The problem was acute such that some farmers suggested the use of recruits and African constables released from the Foot and Mouth cordons. Acknowledging that the NCs had tried to save the situation from further deterioration, the Association went on to say that Cripwell (NC Gutu), "has done all he can do to get those labourers by blandishment and guile but he failed. On grounds of national interests something must be done".<sup>61</sup>

The war brought another dynamic that impacted negatively on the goal of wheat self-sufficiency. Due to the demand for professionals to serve in Allied armies, shortages of skilled and semi-skilled European and African wheat labour became rampant. Many settler white men served in the Imperial Army and this left the older generation on the farms short staffed. In fact, most males left behind were "urban dwellers who had failed medical tests for army duty and these rarely turned into skilled farmers".<sup>62</sup> This placed the intended goal of wheat self-sufficiency behind schedule. With regard to the threshing of the 1943 crop, the RWGA had to make what at that time had become a "normal" request when they wrote to the Food Production Committee (FPC) seeking the release of one R.J.P. van der Bergh of Enkeldoorn, who was serving in the Renaissance Unit (an Allied battalion based at Umtali).<sup>63</sup> Van der Bergh owned a thresher and a tractor which in his absence had no operator. As a result, the man had to balance two careers, one in the army and the other in the wheat industry.

### **The hope that could not fade: wheat production, 1945–1965**

The population explosion in the post-war period made sure that the wheat position remained poor but this did not snuff out the envisaged wheat self-sufficiency. The state's unflinching position on wheat reached its peak with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965. One would have expected the state to change its policy in the face of overwhelming odds but the opposite happened. The vast economic opportunities provided by the country's booming economy in the immediate post-war period as well as the formation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963 attracted thousands of immigrants and ex-servicemen from war-ravaged Europe and the British Commonwealth. Of the Federation's 40 percent increase in non-

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60. NAZ, S955/293/1/2, Wheat Subsidies and Prices: 1943–46, Letter from Secretary, Gutu Farmers Association - Secretary FPC, 5 September 1943.

61. NAZ, S955/293/1/2, Wheat Subsidies and Prices: 1943–46, Letter from Secretary, Gutu Farmers Association - Secretary of FPC, 5 September 1943.

62. R. Hodder-Williams, *White Farmers in Rhodesia: a history of the Marandellas District*, (Macmillan, California, 1983), p 158.

63. NAZ, S955/293/1/2, Wheat Subsidies and Prices: 1943–46, Letter from Secretary of the RWGA - Secretary of FPC, 10 October 1943.

African population from 196 897 to 277 240 between 1951 and 1956, 54 percent were in Southern Rhodesia; 38,5 percent in Northern Rhodesia; and the remaining 7,5 percent in Nyasaland.<sup>64</sup> Most of the immigrants took up employment in mining, agriculture and manufacturing. These new arrivals peaked 17 000 in 1948 alone,<sup>65</sup> and in the process more than doubled the white population in Southern Rhodesia from 82 386 in 1946 to 177 124 in 1956.<sup>66</sup> By 1962, the white population topped 223 000 besides 11 000 coloured people and 7 600 Asians.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the number of Africans in wage employment rose from 254 000 in 1936 to more than 600 000 in 1956.<sup>68</sup> All these developments meant a further increase in the demand for wheat and wheaten products. Post-war population explosion and demand for wheat and wheaten products was not peculiar to Southern Rhodesia. For instance, in 1946 alone, wheat consumption in South Africa, particularly in the Cape and Witwatersrand, increased by 10 and 40 percent respectively.<sup>69</sup>

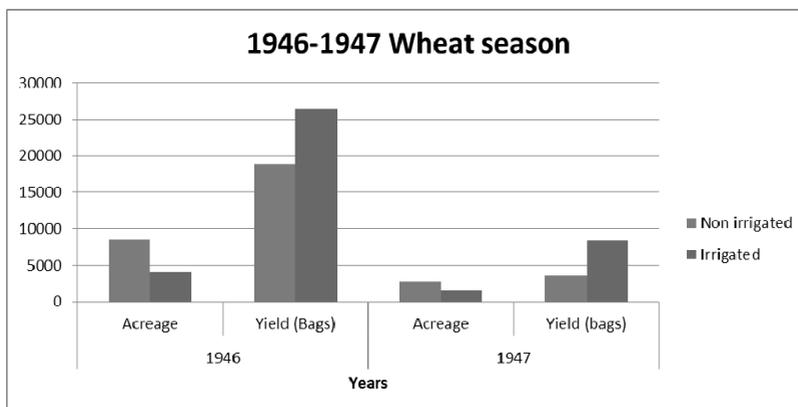
In Southern Rhodesia, the calamity can be appreciated if one considers that this population explosion occurred at a time when the wheat position was deteriorating. Before 1945, the largest yields, ranging from 52 000 to 58 000 bags, were in 1936, 1939, 1943 and 1944.<sup>70</sup> However, after 1946, total yields declined, reaching their lowest in 1950 with 3 405 bags.<sup>71</sup> This decline was mainly caused by the 1947/8 drought which resulted in the loss of moisture needed for the production of *vlei* wheat as well as the drying up of the streams used for irrigation. With such a discouraging return from its investment (in the form of subsidies, bonuses, loans, import quotas and the provision of new wheat varieties), the state accused wheat farmers of failing to complement its efforts in increasing production. This accusation was not new but grew even louder with the steep rise in the demand for wheat and wheaten products.

Among the major impediments to Rhodesia's goal during this time, the state argued, was the use of "inefficient" methods of wheat production. In as much as the farmers shared the state's goal, most were small scale producers. Only a few large farmers produced wheat profitably on irrigated land while the majority farmed in *vlei* areas with very low production rates per acre.<sup>72</sup> *Vlei* had in the 1930s constituted a significant percentage of wheat produced locally but had diminished nutritionally in the 1940s and

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64. C. Baker, "The Non-African Population of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland", *Geography*, 43, 2, 1958, p 133.
  65. Samasuwo, "There is Something Special about Cattle", p 80.
  66. Samasuwo, "There is Something Special about Cattle", p 80.
  67. M. Yudelman, *Africans on Land: Economic Problems of African Agriculture in Southern, Central and East Africa with Special Reference to Southern Rhodesia* (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1964), p 35.
  68. Samasuwo, "There is Something Special about Cattle", p 80.
  69. Tinley, *South African Food and Agriculture*, p 107.
  70. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 57.
  71. Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 57.
  72. Yields of *vlei* wheat averaged 1,8 bags per acre in 1932/3; 2,4 bags in 1943/4; and declined to 1,4 bags between 1948 and 1950. See Weinmann, *Agricultural Research and Development*, p 56.

1950s. For financial reasons, *vlei* wheat farmers neither applied fertilisers nor manure so output per acre declined over time. However, this was just part of the bigger problem facing the wheat industry.

The major issue was the fact that state crop scientists failed to produce a wheat variety suitable for the territory's agro-ecological zones. Recommended varieties were no better than harvested grain so complaints from farmers ignoring the advice of the agricultural officials were rampant. In 1948, the chief agriculturist reported: "A few of the leading wheat growers have followed the advice but the greater majority are content to hear of the good crops reaped by more 'fortunate' farmers and regard those superior results as an act of God."<sup>73</sup> This statement explains what was happening in the wheat industry but the reasons provided are open to criticism. The claim that farmers were impervious to scientific advice was problematic. A number of reasons, other than those provided by the state accounted for the poor production figures. Firstly, the seasons starting from 1947 were not particularly good from a farming point of view. In the 1947/8 season, then considered the worst in the country's colonial history, wheat farmers failed to green manure or apply fertiliser.<sup>74</sup> In many areas, green manure used for winter wheat production was reaped for hay in order to assist in maintaining livestock.<sup>75</sup> The drying up of several moisture retaining areas, and also the failure on the part of several large wheat growers to plant wheat further reversed the pre-1939 successes (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** 1946–1947 wheat season<sup>76</sup>

The drought's effects were widespread as seed-wheat growers could not produce seed, and those who were fortunate could not sell. The state baled them out by placing seed-wheat under the Drought Relief Measures.

73. Cited by A. Masenda, "The Food Production Committee and State Food Policy in Colonial Zimbabwe during the 1940s", MA dissertation, UZ, 1987, p 22.

74. NAZ, S2535/1040/9/6, Chief Agriculturist, Report for 1947.

75. NAZ, S2535/1040/9/6, Chief Agriculturist, Report for 1947.

76. NAZ, S2535/1040/9/6, Chief Agriculturist, Report for 1947.

Under this scheme, farmers received 20/- per bag, that is, the difference between the price of commercial wheat (35/-) and certified wheat (45/-) plus 10/- subsidy per bag.<sup>77</sup> However, owing to lack of seed-wheat, in areas such as Umvuma there was widespread use of harvested grain as seed that season and this seed generally yielded less grain per acre. The centralisation of seed-dealers in two towns (Bulawayo and Gwelo) also meant that transport costs were high for farmers outside these areas.<sup>78</sup>

However, for all its effort, the state did little to market seed-wheat through outreach programmes. Where recommended seeds were used, these could not germinate and a number of complaints were received from farmers. Letters from farmers, C.C Kloppers and W. Shaw of Kanya and Floradale farms respectively, are informative on this issue. Shaw reported:

I wish to draw your attention to the poor germination I had from a bag of Punjab [wheat variety] I bought through the agents of the seed-wheat growers ... the purity is stated as 87 percent but it's sad to say I only got a 7 per cent stand.<sup>79</sup>

Kloppers complained,

[The] seed wheat I bought two months ago has been a complete washout, the wheat has not come up and I would like to put in a claim. It cost me a lot of money, my expenditure was over £75 for seed fertiliser, lime, plough shares and boys' [sic] wages. I have got one bag left that I did not put in; you can have it with the greatest of pleasure and try to make it grow if you can. My lands here are awaiting your inspection.<sup>80</sup>

These setbacks, notwithstanding, the state maintained its stance on local production. By blaming most of the setbacks on natural phenomena, government officials sustained their ambitions by optimistically stating that the following season was going to bring far better results. For instance, the chairperson of the FPC stated:

I see no reason why we should not be producing all our foodstuffs ... given a sympathetic government, a government with good vision, and good farming carried out ... this country is quite capable of producing all its requirements.<sup>81</sup>

This was cheap propaganda. A variety of factors determined the possibility for wheat production in the colony. The chairperson ignored climatic and financial issues such as the unavailability of water resources and the inability (largely financial) of the wheat farmers to take advantage of some

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77. NAZ, S2506/2, Poor Germination of Certified Wheat Seed, Letter from A.E. Romyn, Secretary of Department of Agriculture - Chief Agriculturist, 19 May 1947.
  78. The major wheat growing areas were Charter, Chilimanzi, Melsegger, Hartley, Umtali and Mazoe. All of these were far from Bulawayo and Gwelo.
  79. NAZ, S2506/2, Poor Germination of Certified Wheat Seed, Letter from W. Shaw - Chief Agriculturist, 1 June 1948.
  80. NAZ, S2506/2, Poor Germination of Certified Wheat Seed, Letter from C.C. Kloppers - Chief Agriculturist, 28 June 1948.
  81. NAZ, S955/100, Agricultural Development in Southern Rhodesia, Memoranda: 1943–1949, Report by the FPC, "Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia (1948)".

available water bodies, which partly explain the inability to improve irrigated wheat production.

These difficulties forced the state to take measures designed to plug challenges facing the industry and, it was hoped, salvage success from the jaws of defeat. In the wake of the germination problems, a professional officer charged with duties of testing agricultural seeds was appointed in 1948. The passing of the Seed Regulation Act (1953) was a welcome move as it marked a rapid increase in the volume of seed samples received for testing. However, maize was the only seed-crop being produced under certification. For wheat, officials provided *recommended* seeds. Due to their unreliability, producers deliberately avoided the use of the word *certified*. This was an indirect acknowledgement that locally produced wheat was unreliable.

However, efforts to create a seed industry run on professional lines to save the situation from further deterioration proved inadequate. Until 1953 seed-wheat was sold indiscriminately and important issues, such as packaging were not taken into consideration. The norm was, as H.W. Bosman noted that:

At the Midlands Farmers' Co-op, a farmer merely brings in a few bags of seed and it is sold as such. More often, bags of seed are stored in a warehouse where different varieties are stocked together. Should a farmer ask for a particular variety he is likely to be sold some other variety as the bags are not labelled. No one employed in the Co-op is qualified to distinguish between different varieties.<sup>82</sup>

The above situation typifies the confusion that existed in the seed industry and partly accounts for the farmers' negative response to recommended seeds.

In the post-war period, labour problems, which had become acute during the war, escalated further. The story of R.H. Brooke of Milward Farm is illustrative. Brooke wrote:

I am already a receiver of five farm labourers, one a cripple leaving four fit for work. I now apply for 30 boys for your earliest possible delivery date for food production only ... so far I have only received four boys from you and would certainly look forward to considerably more than this if I am expected to grow ... All recruiting being stopped has deprived me of obtaining labour from those sources so I now depend on you for my requirements. If you are unable to quote a figure I would be greatly relieved and then make arrangements for my inevitable closedown.<sup>83</sup>

In these difficult circumstances, the state through the FPC encouraged farmers to allow African males to reside on the farms with their families as a permanent labour force; the use of women and children as

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82. NAZ, S2518/2, Seed Testing Legislation: 1951–7, Letter from H.W. Bosman (Extension Officer, Gwelo) to Senior Extension Officer, Gwelo, 13 March 1953.

83. NAZ, S955/170, Labour, General, 1949, Letter from R.H. Brooke to the Rhodesia Native Labour Supply Commission (hereafter RNLSC), 19 January 1949.

labourers; and improving living conditions and higher wages.<sup>84</sup> However, this intervention fell short of solving the pertinent handicap in the industry. In fact:

To say that the problem is one of labour shortage is oversimplifying it for quality is probably even more important than quantity. In England, there are farms of [up to] 1 300 acres with a labour force of 15 to 18 adults. It is true that mechanisation has gone further there and that fuel shortages in Rhodesia hamper the replacement of men with machinery but that is not the whole answer. In England where agricultural workers receive a higher wage than they do here, they earn their pay. The same cannot be said of our own farm boys (sic). Some farmers require a good day's work while others are satisfied with very much less. There is thus a tendency for labour to flow to "easier" employers who are not always the best farmers and biggest contributors to the country's food supplies.<sup>85</sup>

The 1950s saw emphasis being placed on raising wages for agricultural labourers. The state and the Rhodesia National Farmers' Union generally believed that if wheat farmers paid competitive wages, they could attract recruits from other territories; reduce the labour drift to South Africa; and enable agriculture to compete for labour with the manufacturing industry.<sup>86</sup> However, this suggestion had its problems because of the diversity of wheat growers, and the fact that farmers in some areas paid higher wages. Furthermore, fixing different minimum wages for different areas would have resulted in the flow of labour from one area to another where they were better paid. Proponents of labour rationing suggested controls in industry and agriculture; grading labour according to quality and output; and paying a living wage for each grade. The major limitation to this proposal was the difficulty in assessing labour requirements in view of the varying conditions under which the wheat farmers were operating. More importantly, there was no guarantee that labourers who moved from an "inefficient" wheat farmer, would go to one who insisted on a "fair" day's work rather than seek his fortune in South Africa or the manufacturing industry.<sup>87</sup> These attempts to lure Africans to work in wage employment were bound to fail because they came at a time when there was heightened worker consciousness. Workers wanted better working and living conditions, better wages, housing, social services and fairer colonial governance.<sup>88</sup> Labour problems in Southern Rhodesia in general and the wheat industry in particular continued throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

From the early 1950s when labour shortages, notwithstanding state efforts, became particularly acute for wheat producers, the government shifted its commitment from winter to summer wheat production. This change was largely attributable to H.C. Mundy, a former Secretary of Agriculture and farmer, who advised:

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84. NAZ, S955/100, Agricultural Development in Southern Rhodesia, Memoranda 1943–49, Report of the FPC, "Agriculture in Southern Rhodesia (1948)".

85. "Tackling the Labour Question", *Rhodesian Farmer*, 17 January 1951.

86. "Tackling the Labour Question", *Rhodesian Farmer*, 17 January 1951.

87. "Tackling the Labour Question", *Rhodesian Farmer*, 17 January 1951.

88. Mlambo, "From the Second World War to UDI", p 96.

Southern Rhodesia's annual consumption of wheat is reported to have risen to about 400 000 bags, local production is almost negligible. Our European demand for wheat production is constantly expanding ... I understand that the government is pinning its hopes for larger wheat production on the Sabi Irrigation Scheme but from my past experience with wheat at what is now Vandenberg Estate I fear it will be found that wheat will grow so rapidly as to give very low yields. The Department should concentrate on a policy of wheat breeding in order to develop strains sufficiently rust resistant to be grown in summer in Mashonaland ...<sup>89</sup>

In his response to Mundy, Sansom discouraged the suggested shift to summer wheat, arguing that it was affected by weeds no matter how clean the land was when the wheat was sown and that its quality was lower than that of winter wheat by an average of 3lbs.<sup>90</sup> He also noted that at Matopos Experimental Station, where wheat breeding was underway, there was only a limited amount of field work done due to lack of facilities; that conditions were not typical of any wheat growing areas; and there was a shortage of staff.<sup>91</sup>

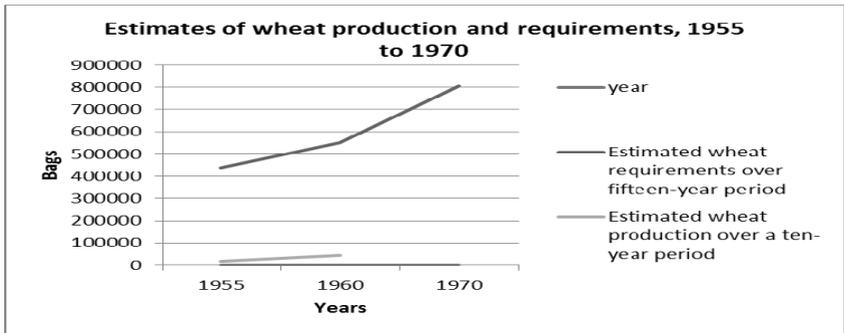
This debate was followed closely in government circles. Being an influential person and perhaps by virtue of having previously carried a higher office than that of Sansom, the only experienced wheat breeder in the country at that time, Mundy's ideas were popular because they tallied with the overall goal of self-sufficiency. Correspondence was exchanged between Sansom and Mundy each propounding his view. What this correspondence reveals is that, in their desperation for wheat self-sufficiency, the officials in the Agriculture Department and farmers who shared the view that wheat could be grown in summer, were prepared to ignore expert advice. Using a figure (shown below, Figure 3), Mundy estimated the imbalance between production and requirements on which he based his argument for summer wheat production. Whereas Sansom considered the country's agro-ecological conditions, Mundy based his opinion largely on the country's rising wheat needs and his conviction that the country could provide for itself. Mundy triumphed in the first leg of the debate but the subsequent failures in summer wheat production, demonstrated the importance of Sansom's advice.

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89. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from H.G. Mundy - P.B. Fletcher (Minister of Agriculture and Lands), November 1950.

90. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from T.K. Sansom (Acting Chief Agriculturist) - Director of Research and Specialist Services, 30 November 1950.

91. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from T.K. Sansom - Director of Research and Specialist Services, 30 November 1950.



**Figure: 3** Wheat production and requirements<sup>92</sup>

Mundy also believed that what he called a “third world war”, pitting capitalist against socialist powers, was imminent. He reasoned that “when World War Three comes it can be expected that the difficulty of importing our increased and increasing wheat requirements will be greater than ever before”.<sup>93</sup> He received support from agricultural officials who recommended summer wheat in certain parts of the territory. For instance, the Land Development Officer at Nyanyadzi, C.D. Humphrey, wrote that he had supervised summer wheat production at Nyanyadzi Irrigation Settlement since 1949, and that in 1950, there were 90 acres planted which yielded 2 517 bags, averaging 8.2 bags per acre, with top yields of 12.5 bags per acre.<sup>94</sup> Humphrey’s testimony was misconstrued to mean that such success could be replicated in all the territory’s five agro-ecological zones.

To promote this new ambition, the government persuaded farmers to try summer wheat production. Given that these farmers were growing under instruction, with no certainty that seed varieties provided were good, the FPC guaranteed a minimum return of £7.10.0 per acre.<sup>95</sup> However, this new drive started on a very bad note because the crop fell victim to excessive rains and rust in January and February 1951. Nonetheless, the state forged ahead with the scheme. Similar attempts in 1952 bore the same results hence the state pardoned farmers who had taken summer seed, arguing that “since the farmers concerned were persuaded to participate in the experiment by the FPC they should not be persecuted for their ready cooperation by being required to pay for seed that had not produced any

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92. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from H.G. Mundy (farmer and former Secretary of Agriculture) - P.B. Fletcher (Minister of Agriculture and Lands), November 1950.
93. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from Mundy - Sansom, 22 January 1951.
94. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from C.D. Humphrey (Land Development Officer, Nyanyadzi) - Secretary of Rhodesia National Farmers’ Union, 19 January 1951.
95. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from E.D. Palmer (Chairman of the FPC) to Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Lands, 22 June 1951.

return”.<sup>96</sup> The financial costs of such a venture were high because out of a total expenditure of £903 for the 1951/2 crop, the government received back only £371,11.<sup>97</sup>

This shift coincided with the formation of the Federation in 1953 which resulted in rapid economic development in the region and was generally characterised by prosperity in mining, agriculture and service industries. Federal and territorial towns also grew rapidly with Nyasaland providing cheap labour to Southern Rhodesia farms and mines while Northern Rhodesia contributed its copper earnings, most of which were invested in Federal projects which benefited Southern Rhodesia.<sup>98</sup> European agriculture in Southern Rhodesia was put under the Federal government and therefore had access to the greater financial and technological skills necessary for making agriculture profitable. In fact, the development of white agriculture was the “centrepiece” of the Federal government’s economic policy.<sup>99</sup> The 1955–56 budget allocated £2 345 281 to agricultural development, a figure that was increased annually until the end of the Federation in 1963.<sup>100</sup> For instance, 63 and 71 percent of the funds allocated for agricultural development in the 1956–7 and 1957–8 budget respectively was set aside for subsidies.<sup>101</sup> Besides funds received in the form of direct government subsidies, settler farmers received credit offered by state-controlled regional land and agricultural banks. From 1953 to 1959, the Southern Rhodesia Land and Agricultural Bank granted £28,8 million to white farmers in short and long term loans.<sup>102</sup> The impact of this assistance to European agriculture can be seen when one notices that its gross value rose from £34,2 million to a record £39 million in 1955.<sup>103</sup> While it is clear that substantial amounts of funds were ploughed into settler agriculture in this period, it is important to state that at no time did wheat ever become an important Federal export.

Southern Rhodesia utilised Federal financial resources to augment her quest for wheat self-sufficiency. The establishment of the Department of Research and Specialist Services (DRSS) in 1948 had been a welcome move but until the Federal period it had failed to rid the wheat industry of its problems because it was preoccupied with research on important cash crops such as tobacco and cotton. One of the most important interventions by the Federal government towards wheat production in Southern Rhodesia was the invitation of a Danish research scientist, O.J.O. Olesen in 1956 to

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96. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Letter from E.D. Palmer - Secretary of Department of Agriculture and Lands, 28 March 1953.

97. NAZ, S2506/3, Summer Wheat Seed, 1947/8, Report of the FPC, September 1953.

98. Mlambo, “From the Second World War to UDI”, p 91.

99. L. Mumeka, “Macroeconomic Policies and the Development of Agriculture in Zimbabwe since 1980”, in S.R and J.M. Zamchiya (eds), *Service Provision and its Impact on Agricultural and Rural Development in Zimbabwe: The Case of Gazaland District* (IFPRI, Washington DC, 1992), p 10.

100. Mumeka, “Macroeconomic Policies and the Development of Agriculture”, p 10.

101. Mumeka, “Macroeconomic Policies and the Development of Agriculture”, p 10.

102. Mumeka, “Macroeconomic Policies and the Development of Agriculture”, p 11.

103. Mumeka, “Macroeconomic Policies and the Development of Agriculture”, p 13.

come and carry out wheat research.<sup>104</sup> Olesen initiated a wheat breeding programme building on the earlier stocks and introduced new varieties from other parts of the world. Breeding programmes to develop varieties suitable for summer wheat production were extended. Notwithstanding this, no suitable summer wheat variety and weed killers had been developed by 1965. In 1960, the total wheat acreage in the country was 930 acres from which 5 300 bags were reaped.<sup>105</sup> Still smarting from the costly mistakes of the 1950s, Southern Rhodesia returned to winter wheat in 1962. Explaining this shift, the Secretary of Agriculture stated:

There can be no considerable increase in wheat production in this country except in conjunction with large scale irrigation schemes ... until new discoveries are made in weed and disease control which make summer production under rainfall economically possible, it is considered that the policy towards wheat production should be to encourage maximum use in suitable rotations of our winter irrigation potential...<sup>106</sup>

Results were immediate, with the average output rising from 2 to 8.8 bags per acre and the wheat acreage rising to 1 540 acres.<sup>107</sup> Concomitant to this was the reduction in the acreage of summer wheat. In 1963, only 630 acres were under summer wheat with an average output of 2 bags per acre.<sup>108</sup> From 1964, wheat was mainly grown on a large scale by the Tokwe Development Company (Triangle Ltd), on an area covering 1 700 acres, as part of a mixed crop rotation with cotton, beans and groundnuts.<sup>109</sup> Not surprisingly, in 1964 only 1.5 percent of the nation's wheat consumption was locally grown and this was a much lower than the 7 percent in 1928.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore in 1965, the local content of the country's bread was 4 percent which was a far cry from the 20 percent in 1932.<sup>111</sup>

Political developments arising from the end of the Federation in 1963 had an important influence on wheat production in the territory. The independence of Zambia and Malawi soon after the dissolution of the Federation left an important political question in Southern Rhodesia (now re-named Rhodesia) where settlers were unwilling to accept independence based on universal suffrage.<sup>112</sup> In 1964, political changes within Rhodesia resulted in the removal of Sir Winston Field from power as prime minister after his party felt that he had failed to bring an assurance of independence

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104. NAZ, GEN-P/SAB, Sabi Limpopo Authority, "The Story of Lowveld Wheat, 1968".

105. NAZ, GEN-P/AGRI, Agricultural Marketing Authority of Rhodesia, *The Wheat Marketing Situation*, September 1971.

106. NAZ, F226/1091/3/5, Agricultural Marketing Council, *Wheat 1962/3*, Letter from R. Griffith (Secretary Federal Ministry of Agriculture) - Chairman, Agriculture Marketing Council, 8 January 1962.

107. NAZ, GEN-P/AGRI, Agricultural Marketing Authority of Rhodesia, *Wheat Marketing Situation*, September 1971.

108. I.B. Edwards, "Wheat Breeding Research and its Impact on Wheat Production in Rhodesia", *Modern Farming*, March 1970, p 23.

109. NAZ, GEN-P/SAB, Sabi Limpopo Authority, "The Story of Lowveld Wheat", 1968.

110. "Golden Dream", *Rhodesian Scene*, 1968.

111. NAZ, GEN-P/SAB, Sabi Limpopo Authority, "The Story of Lowveld Wheat", 1968.

112. J. Mtisi, M. Nyakudya and T. Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments during the UDI period", in Raftopoulos and Mlambo (eds), *Becoming Zimbabwe*, p 118.

on terms acceptable to them.<sup>113</sup> Britain responded to UDI on 11 November 1965 by severing diplomatic ties and placing sanctions against Rhodesia. These included cessation of trade; removal from the sterling area and Commonwealth preference system; and denying the country access to London's capital markets.<sup>114</sup> She also banned the purchase of Rhodesian sugar and tobacco, stopping a net 71 percent by value of Rhodesian exports to Britain.<sup>115</sup> By December 1965, Britain had extended the ban to all minerals and foodstuffs, which made up 95 percent of Rhodesian exports to Britain.<sup>116</sup> The Rhodesian government reacted to these changes by re-organising the agricultural sector. This process was characterised by the reduction of tobacco production in order to diversify the type of crops produced. Simultaneously, the state encouraged large scale production of maize, cotton, wheat, soya beans and beef.

Rhodesian farmers took advantage of the similarity in production technologies between wheat and other crops to shift to wheat. Much of the machinery needed for land preparation, fertiliser and pesticide application, and irrigation of wheat was already available, thereby reducing the time required to switch to wheat production. The government also created strong incentives for commercial farmers to take up wheat production. Producer prices for wheat were maintained above import parity prices, and subsidised credit programs were introduced.<sup>117</sup> Response to these incentives was immediate. For instance, just after UDI a new irrigation scheme was started by the Sabi Limpopo Authority at Mkwazine (Mkwazine Wheat Scheme) on an area covering 2 400 acres.<sup>118</sup> This initiative resulted in the rise of the average yield per acre for the year 1965 to 12 bags, a significant rise from the 8.8 bags in 1962.<sup>119</sup> Between 1965 and 1975 rapid growth in wheat production transformed the nation from a net wheat importer to a net exporter.<sup>120</sup> However, local production of wheat in the absence of an export market translated into an oversupply in the domestic market and falling prices – which ultimately meant lower profit margins for farmers.<sup>121</sup>

## Conclusion

This study dispels the common narrative on settler agriculture that in the 1920s the local agricultural market was becoming too small to absorb local produce; that the production of each crop was faced with overproduction; and that during the Second World War there was a change from conditions

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113. Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments", p 118.

114. Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments", p 126–127.

115. Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments", p 127.

116. Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments", p 127.

117. M.L. Lorris, "Comparative Advantage and Policy Incentives for Wheat Production in Zimbabwe", CIMMYT Economics Working Paper, 88/02 <http://repository.cimmyt.org/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10883/1125/19910.pdf?sequence=1> Accessed 12 January 2013.

118. NAZ, GEN-P/SAB, Sabi Limpopo Authority, "The Story of Lowveld Wheat, 1968".

119. NAZ, GEN-P/SAB, Sabi Limpopo Authority, "The Story of Lowveld Wheat, 1968".

120. Lorris, "Comparative Advantage and Policy Incentives".

121. Mtisi, Nyakudya and Barnes, "Social and Economic Developments", p 129.

of surplus production to one of shortages. The attempt by the settler government to attain wheat self-sufficiency, although noble, ended in failure. With due consideration of the futile efforts made to tip the balance of trade in wheat and wheaten products in favour of the settler community, it is safe to argue that the history of wheat production reveals that Southern Rhodesia had to run twice as fast so as to remain in the same position.

This situation was attributable to a number of reasons. The rising population meant an increased demand for wheat and wheaten products, but the harsh climatic conditions made the growing of wheat difficult and expensive. Financial incapacities meant that the nascent wheat industry could not be placed on a sound footing. Furthermore, labour shortages grew increasingly acute; wheat farmers could not get sufficient labour at a reasonable cost. In turn, these restraints precluded the arrest of the rising import bill and the attainment of the national goal of self-sufficiency. Eventually, adequate state support for wheat production came with UDI in November 1965 which meant that the territory attained what successive Southern Rhodesian governments had failed to achieve over a long period. Even so, the bubble only lasted for a short period because the oversupply in the domestic market and falling prices ultimately meant lower profit margins for farmers.

### **Abstract**

Given that temperate conditions are essential for wheat production, Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia), located in the tropics, is certainly not an ideal wheat producing area. As such, each year reports circulate in the Zimbabwean media regarding the numerous challenges faced by wheat farmers emphasising immediate action lest the nation fails to get bread, an important component of the Zimbabwean diet. However, given the importance of wheat and wheaten products, it is amazing that very little is known about the history of wheat culture in the country and the historical role played by the colonial state towards its development. This study traces the historical development of wheat production, arguing that it grew as a result of the perpetuation of Western modes of consumption, and that this history is characterised by futile attempts to tip the balance of wheat trade in favour of the settler community. It concludes that by 1965, climatic challenges, labour shortages, population explosion and financial difficulties had conspired to deny Southern Rhodesia the envisaged goal of self-sufficiency in wheat and wheaten products.

**Keywords:** Wheat production; Southern Rhodesia; settler farmers; agriculture; wheaten products; labour shortages.

### **Opsomming**

Gegewe die feit dat gematigde klimaatstoestande noodsaaklik is vir die produksie van koring, is Zimbabwe (voorheen Suid-Rhodesië), wat in 'n subtropiese gebied geleë is, nie ideaal daarvoor geskik nie. Derhalwe verskyn daar jaarliks berigte in die Zimbabweese media aangaande die verskeie

uitdagings wat graanprodusente in die gesig staar. Die berigte beklemtoon gewoonlik die behoefte aan drastiese optrede in gevalle wanneer daar 'n broodgebrek voorkom aangesien brood 'n belangrike komponent van die Zimbabwiese stapeldieët vorm. Desnieteenstaande die belangrikheid van koring en koringprodukte, is dit opvallend dat daar min kennis bestaan oor die geskiedenis van die koringkultuur in die land en die historiese rol wat die koloniale staat gespeel het in die ontwikkeling van hierdie kultuur. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die historiese ontwikkeling van koringproduksie in Zimbabwe en voer aan dat dit ontwikkel het as volg van die bestendiging van westerse verbruikerspatrone. Die geskiedenis van hierdie verbruikerspatrone is gekenmerk deur futiele pogings om die skaal van die koringhandel in die guns van die wit setlaarsgemeenskap te swaai. Die artikel kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat faktore soos klimaatsveranderinge, arbeidstekorte, bevolkingsontploffing en finansiële probleme teen 1965 meegewerk het om Suid-Rhodesië se voorneme van selfversorgendheid ten opsigte van graan te verydel.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Koring; selfversorgendheid; Suid-Rhodesië; setlaarboere; landbou; koringprodukte; arbeidstekorte