Message from Gerrit van Rensburg, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

"In the light of ever increasing electricity costs, farmers need to investigate alternative measures to offset their production cost," Gerrit van Rensburg, Western Cape Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, said at the recent Agri Western Cape Congress held in Goudini.

Van Rensburg referred to the Western Cape’s relationship with Upper Austria in the Regional Leaders Summit. "Upper Austria is 20 years ahead of us regarding the generation of electricity on farms, using farm produced materials," he said. This technology utilizes biogas from products such as wood chips or manure to generate electricity.

Upper Austria currently has 75 biogas plants, of which 45 are run by farmers. It generates 34% of the region electricity usage, and their aim is to increase this to 100% by 2030, Van Rensburg told delegates.

“We need a mind shift in the Western Cape from trying to save as much electricity usage as possible to one of finding ways to generate as much electricity as possible on our farms,” Van Rensburg said. The Western Cape Department is in the process of constructing a biogas plant on its Oudtshoorn research farm, where electricity will be generated using cow manure from its dairy. The plant will come into operation in 2012.

Van Rensburg said the Western Cape Department of Agriculture is prepared to sponsor a leading expert in the field of biogas electricity generation from Upper Austria to visit and assist local farmers with the implementation of this technology.

Carl Opperman, CEO of Agri Western Cape, reacted positively to this announcement. "We need to investigate all the different options available in order to reduce producer input cost, with electricity being a major one."

Opperman also said this technology could have positive spinoffs such as the creation of additional employment opportunities, and generating income from selling surplus electricity into the national grid. We could do this, whilst at the same time reducing our products’ carbon footprint. “With greener products there is the potential of additional market access for our export products,” Opperman said.