

Promoting Agriculture
ZNFU's E-extension System

By Zainab Pandor

After the introduction of ZNFU'S SMS Market and Trade Information Service, followed by the E-transport, ZNFU is now proud to launch the E-extension system. The platform was launched by the Honorable Minister, Wylbur Simuusa on 22nd May 2014 at ZNFU in the presence of the president of ZNFU, Dr Evenly Nguleka, senior government officials, members of the ZNFU and Board of Directors, council members, distinguished invited guests and members of the press.

The E-Extension service, currently running on Airtel is an addition to ZNFU farmers' package of Information Communication and Technologies. On this platform, an information system has been created to disseminate information to farmers to enable them to make better decisions in the market analysis and keep up with changes in production.

For sustained growth in agricultural activity, farmers require timely information to progress. Vital information like weather trends and market information is needed to make the most of their produce and ensure they are not lagging behind from fellow farmers.

Compared to the SMS market and trade information service which was launched in 2006, the E-extension service is detailed to provide more information. Together with market prices, the user can get access to agricultural events that include agricultural shows, field days and trainings provided by companies. Under the directory farmers can get access to the contact details and location of veterinary services, seed companies, agro agents, organizations, traders and others alike. Contact details for extension officers in a particular district are also available.

Using the E-extension service, farmers can also benefit with vital information about crop field practices and crop diseases specific to a particular crop. Tips on livestock production and information on livestock diseases that need vigilance are part of the service on this platform. In addition, weather data can also be accessed.

“If the user is interested in growing a particular kind of crop, the E-extension service will tell you what the seed rate is, what type of fertilizer you need to apply and some of the common diseases the crop may be vulnerable to. Apart from nine crops, we also have livestock on the platform with the diseases they may be prone to catching, the common symptoms of those diseases and possible treatments. And it will tell you the standard vaccinations that you need to give the particular animal,” says Tibone Moyo, ZNFU'S Market Information Economist.

“If a farmer wants to grow maize or soya beans, the service tells you how to go about it. On the market prices, we also have input prices whereby farmers can access prices for commodities like

seed. Thus, farmers will have an idea of how much inputs are going for before they even go to purchase and they can compare which farming supplier is cheaper.”

Users need to get themselves registered in order to get access to the E-extension system. It is easy as all one needs to know is how to send an SMS. Users will then be able to explore on their own. It is currently free but an affordable fee of only K2.50 will be charged per week for unlimited access. The user feedback will allow ZNFU to improve on the system and provide answers to queries.

Tibone says they hope they can collaborate with private players to feed in event details. Latest agriculture news will also be posted in the messaging section. Hence, users, especially the small-scale farmers who don't have access to the internet can also be in touch with merely using a simple mobile phone.

“Lack of extension services has been a matter of concern for a long time among farmers. As a Union, we are determined to overcome the numerous barriers that farmers face and will keep exploring new frontiers for solutions. We are happy that the picture has started to change as government has made progress in employing extension staff although there are still challenges of general operational issues such as mobility,” said Dr Evenly Nguleka during the launch of the E-extension service.

“We found it befitting to take practical steps and begin to tap into the existing sources of extension information including government and bring this much desired information closer to the farmer through a simple gadget like a cell phone. By improving farmers' access to extension information we can begin to provide timely support to farmers to improve output. Let me at this juncture express our gratitude to our cooperating partners – the donors and Musika for the financial support which the Union has continued to receive.”

The E-extension system is a low cost, easily accessible service. With this new development in ICT infrastructure, farmers can get take advantage of market opportunities and be in touch with a simple mobile phone. Clearly, the launch of the E-extension system has been a huge success noting the 300 users within two weeks of the launch.

END

