

# PRESS RELEASE

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## Woolworths changes the way it farms fresh produce

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Always at the forefront of innovation, Woolworths has, together with its suppliers, pioneered a new method of farming fresh produce. Farming for the future aims to radically improve soil and plant health, preserve resources like water and soil and protect biodiversity. Initial trials show yields and quality are more consistent and land, water, insecticide, pesticide and fertilizer usage is reduced. This will help ensure that South Africa is able to grow sufficient produce in future.

Currently, more than 50 percent of our fresh produce is farmed this way and these new farming techniques will be implemented at all Woolworths produce supplier farms around the country. By 2012 all Woolworths locally grown fresh produce will either be produced organically or through the Farming for the future approach.

Woolworths chief executive officer Simon Susman explains, “Having realised several years ago that conventional farming methods were not sustainable and were, in fact, depleting the soil’s capacity to produce quality fruit and vegetables as its carbon and biodiversity content shrunk, Woolworths decided to work with our produce farmers to look for alternatives. Our agricultural experts have now spent three years developing the practices with our suppliers.”

This marks a further important milestone on Woolworths Good business journey where we set ongoing targets to carry on business in a far more sustainable way.

“Our goal here is to grow quality produce while minimising any negative effect on the environment and reducing farmer’s dependence on chemical fertilisers, herbicides and

pesticides. We've learned that the way to do that is to build and maintain healthy soil and healthy plants. As any farmer will tell you, it takes good soil to produce good food, and without proper soil management now, South Africa will not be able to produce quality fresh produce in the future," says Susman.

### **Conventional farming methods are increasingly not sustainable**

Susman continues, "We found that most of our fruit and vegetables were grown in soil that was increasingly depleted of minerals and nutrients. Conventional farming methods extract minerals and nutrients from the soil, so over time, more and more fertilisers are needed. Fertilisers are basically mineral salts, so they also increase the salinity of the soil. As a result, even with additional expensive inputs, experience has shown that the volume and quality of crops decreases over time. In other words, it takes more to produce less. The goal of Farming for the future is to do the opposite - produce more using less."

### **New methods improve soil and water quality and encourage biodiversity**

Healthy soil also offers numerous benefits for the environment.

"When soil is healthy, it requires less irrigation because it is better able to retain water. It is also better able to bind carbon back into the earth, which helps mitigate against global warming and climate change," says Susman, adding that soil erosion and loss of top soil are also reduced.

"Healthy soil also requires fewer chemical interventions, so these techniques also reduce chemical run-off into water systems, helping to maintain the quality of our water," says Susman;

Susman explains, "Responsible management of water as a natural resource is a major concern in South Africa and a key focus under Farming for the future. Both on-farm crop irrigation practices, as well as management of waste water generated in fresh produce pack houses and processing facilities, form an integral part of the Farming for the future programme."

Using fewer chemicals and pesticides also contributes to maintaining and encouraging biodiversity, both in and above the soil. This is of particular significance in South Africa, which is home to three of only 34 biodiversity ‘hotspots’ in the world and is, in fact, the third most bio diverse country on the planet. Farming for the future encourages biodiversity not only because a healthy field is a complex ecosystem which includes everything from microbes in the soil to the birds that enjoy a share of the crop, but as soils are not depleted, there is less need to continually clear new land for farming.

Farm workers also benefit in terms of reduced exposure to pesticides and herbicides.

### **No extra cost to consumers**

More good news for South African consumers is that producing produce using Farming for the future methods costs no more than conventional farming. In fact, while yields and quality are more consistent, input costs for fertilisers and the lower necessity for agro-chemicals can reduce costs.

### **Supported by WWF**

Woolworths Farming for the future initiative is supported by leading environmental organisation, WWF South Africa. Mark Botha, Head of Living Lands at WWF says, “Maintaining ecosystem integrity is a major challenge facing South African farmers. This includes issues of soil health, over-allocated and degraded water resources and biodiversity destruction. As key players in the food value chain, retailers and their suppliers can make a meaningful contribution to accelerating the adoption of better management practices in agriculture. We commend Woolworths for taking the lead in driving positive change in this competitive sector”.

### **Working with nature**

In a nutshell, Farming for the future is a holistic approach based on working with nature instead of against it and combining the best of conventional farming with the best of organic farming. As Susman explains, “We will continue to pursue organic farming but the yields can be inconsistent. We realised this was not a large scale solution – rather a

selective choice to offer our customers. We've learned a great deal from our experience with organic farming, for example about managing soil and plant health, as well as about integrated pest management. Now we're able to apply these insights through Farming for the future".

Virtually every aspect of the farming process is systematically and scientifically managed. "Rather than relying on past experience, and blanket formulae, interventions, such as irrigation or the application of fertiliser, are based on actual measurements and analysis," says Susman. This means that water, chemicals or nutrients are only used if and when required.

While healthy soil is the principal key to producing healthy crops, soil microbial activity and soil minerals are only two of some seven areas that farmers have to monitor regularly. The others include plant health, pest control, water (both in terms of water requirements and management of waste water), and biodiversity.

Woolworths agricultural experts have been working closely with each individual produce farmer, ensuring that they understand the principles of Farming for the future, as well as how to carry out the assessments that help them manage their crop production.

### **Monitoring progress**

Susman stresses that the introduction of Farming for the future techniques is a journey. Each farm has been individually and independently audited to establish its baseline use of Farming for the future methods and to set goals. Some farms, which have been practising these techniques for up to five years, are already more than 90 percent compliant. Farms will continue to be independently audited on an annual basis. Woolworths will be aided in this process by an internationally recognised, independent consulting service.

Woolworths customers will begin seeing the new farming for the future logo on some fresh produce this month. Produce from farms that are at least 75 percent compliant with the new Farming for the future criteria, will carry the full label; produce from farms that

are from 50 percent to 74 percent compliant will carry an 'in conversion' label. By 2012, all locally grown fresh produce at Woolworths – which accounts for over 90 percent of Woolworths fresh produce – will either be certified organic or grown using Farming for the future methods. Currently more than 50 percent of Woolworths produce is farmed using these methods.

In conclusion Susman said, “Farming for the future is a significant paradigm shift and a giant leap forward on how we farm fresh produce in South Africa. In my view, Farming for the future will help to secure the sustainability of South Africa’s soils, water resources and productive capacity in the long term. It is clearly kinder to the environment, better for true biodiversity and, best of all, yields and quality are more consistent and there is no extra cost to our customers.”

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## **NOTES FOR THE EDITOR**

### Woolworths Good business journey

The Good business journey, announced by Woolworths CEO in April 2007, is a far-reaching plan which incorporates a series of challenging targets and commitments centred on four key priorities – accelerating transformation, driving social development, enhancing Woolworth’s environmental focus and addressing climate change.

Woolworths currently sells a significant volume of the fresh produce sold in the formal retail sector in South Africa.

### Consumer benefits of Farming for the future

- it does not cost customers more
- improves soil and water quality
- promotes water saving
- encourages biodiversity
- cares for the environment

## How we measure Farming for the future

- **Soil Mineral Management:**

Farming for the future reduces the use of synthetic fertilisers by increasing on-farm nutrient cycling and makes use of measurements to determine if the minerals in the soil are correct. This is preferred to routine chemical use in conventional farming.

- **Soil Microbe Management:**

Farming for the future builds soil structure, soil microbial activity and soil carbon by reducing the use of synthetic fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides with increasing on-farm nutrient cycling.

- **Pest Management:**

Farming for the future employs integrated pest management principles in order to reduce reliance on chemical pesticides and herbicides. By reducing the use of chemicals, resistance to pesticides, possible chemical contamination of the environment and/or food, and health risks to spray operators are reduced.

- **Plant Management:**

Farming for the future improves the management of plants through leaf analysis, monitoring plants, seed treatment, foliar fertilising, fertigation, intercropping, growth stimulants, hydroponics and atmospheric management.

- **Water Management:**

Farming for the future optimises the use of water per kilogram of product produced and reduces the negative impact of poor water usage on the environment. Crops receive the optimum amount of water required rather than routine irrigation.

- **Biodiversity Management:**

Farming for the future helps improve biodiversity on each farm by managing the following: threatened eco-systems, invading alien plants, veldt-fires, corridors and habitat fragmentation, restoration and rehabilitation, game management in natural areas and the impact of agricultural by-products (plastic containers, plastic from hydroponics etc.).

- **Waste Water Management:**

Farming for the future helps prevent the negative impact of effluent water on the environment.

## How does Farming for the Future compare with Conventional and Organic Farming?

	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>Organic</b>	<b>Farming for the future</b>
<b>Farming philosophy</b>	Focus is on yields and artificial inputs only	Farming that follows organic principals	Combining best of organics with the best of conventional farming Over time, reduces dependency on conventional methods
<b>Soil fertility</b>	Uses artificial fertiliser, within prescribed limits	Adds compost and organic fertiliser to soil	Adds compost and organic fertiliser to soil Only adds artificial fertiliser when necessary to correct levels of plant nutrients. Farmers' dependency on artificial fertilisers will decline
<b>Chemical Pesticides and herbicides</b>	Added within legal limits	Organically certified chemicals, herbicides or pesticides (IFOAM)	Only when necessary to control unwanted insects or disease, and restores balance Farmers' dependency will decline
<b>Yields and Availability</b>	Yields and availability depend on ever-increasing inputs	Inconsistent yields and limited availability	Aim to improve yields and availability

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The following information can be found on [www.woolworthsholdings.co.za](http://www.woolworthsholdings.co.za):

1. Press release.
2. Video with CEO Simon Susman introducing Farming for the Future.
3. A case study (video) using this technique on a supplier farm, Flip Nel.
4. Audio questions and answers with Simon Susman. (also available as text.)

### **More information on Enviroscientific**

Enviroscientific is the leading scientific organisation that develops and audits environmental sustainability models. Enviroscientific employs professional scientists registered with SACNASP (the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions). All their professional scientists have post-graduate qualifications and experience.