**MEDIA STATEMENT**

**COMMITTEES ON AGRICULTURE WELCOME THE ABSORPTION OF ALL EMPLOYEES IN THE RECONFIGURED DEPARTMENT**

**Parliament, Tuesday, 5 May 2020 –**The Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, and the Select Committee on Land Reform, Environment, Minerals and Energy were today briefed by the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, the Commission on the Restitution of Land Rights and the Ingonyama Trust Board on their strategic and annual performance plans, and the medium term expenditure framework budget for 2020/21.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, Ms Thoko Didiza informed the committees that the department’s new reconfigured structure has been finalised by the Department of Public Service and Administration. She said, according to the new structure, the employees of the former two departments will be absorbed without any job losses, a move that was appreciated by the committees especially the avoidance of job losses.

The committees further welcomed the R1.2 billion Relief Fund which has been set aside to assist farmers that are affected by COVID-19. However, the committees raised concerns over the ability of the Land Bank to administer the R100 million for small scale farmers given the situation the bank finds itself in.  The Department had received over 55 000 applications from farmers by the closing date of 22 April 2020 for assistance.

Although the number of farmers who need assistance is huge, but the committees were pleased to hear that the criteria for small-scale farmers of R50 000 turnover was reduced to R20 000.

It is hoped that other programs and strategies of the department such as the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy earmarked for R400 million from the Stimulus Package can address the inequalities of the past, by acquiring land and transferring it to the farmers to address the issues of restitution and labour tenants.

Given the fact that R680 million has been set aside to support all the smallholder and communal farmers, the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee, Inkosi Zwelivelile Mandela, raised a concern over accountability for fruitless and wasteful expenditure.

The committees raised further concerns with the Commission on Restitution on Land Rights regarding the backlog of 7743 outstanding claims, and that only 454 claims that are likely to be settled in the current financial year. In almost all of the Ad Hoc Committee Introducing Legislation to Amend Section 25 of the Constitution’s public hearings, it was evident that communities are waiting for their share of the land and are demanding that the process must be accelerated.

The committees questioned the Ingonyama Trust Board (ITB) on the acting appointment of the Chief Executive Officer as the post has been vacant since 2018. The committees also noted with concern the fact that the Annual Performance Plan and the Budget of the entity were submitted late, yet the same entity requires R52 million for its operations.

On land allocation, the committees heard that 99% of the land owned by ITB is still going to be surveyed. The process of land allocation, proper cadastral and geographical information system (GIS) is still ongoing before it can be reflected in the Deeds Office.

The committees will be monitoring the District Development Model to ensure that the Farmer Production Support Units are strengthened and that all farmers receive the assistance they require at district level.

**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, LAND REFORM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT, NKOSI ZWELIVELILE MANDELA.**