

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wetlands are sensitive and vital systems in our environment, and yet they are decreasing and degrading at an alarming rate. Agriculture is considered the principal cause of wetland loss worldwide. Not only do we need to protect or conserve wetlands to secure our water resources for our own future and well-being, but we are also bound by national and international commitments to do so. A body of international, regional and national policies and treaties exists that relates to the conservation of water ecosystems. South Africa also has policies and acts protecting our wetlands, but overlaps and gaps regarding wetland legislation exist, and shared responsibilities between different government departments lead to ineffective implementation. The need for clear guidelines regarding the sustainable use of wetlands in agriculture is vital for their conservation in South Africa. The Department of Agriculture identified this need and, together with the Water Research Commission, made funding available for this project.

This discussion paper serves as a starting point to address conservation and protection of wetlands in the agricultural sector. In future it is hoped that this document will form part of a larger interdepartmental discussion group, whereby wetlands will be optimally managed and protected. Relevant discussion points were obtained from literature studies and workshops.