



MINISTER
AGRICULTURE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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MEDIA STATEMENT

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MINISTER STEENHUISEN HAILS 11% SURGE IN AGRICULTURAL EXPORTS AS MARKET EXPANSION DRIVES GROWTH AND JOB CREATION

The Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, has welcomed the agricultural sector's outstanding performance in the first quarter (Q1) of 2026, saying it underscores the importance of expanding existing export markets while aggressively pursuing new opportunities for South African producers.

Improving market access and advocacy for a growing sector are part of the seven strategic priorities of the Department of Agriculture.

New data released by Agbiz shows that South Africa's agricultural exports increased by 11% in Q1 of 2026 compared to the same period last year, reaching US\$3,7 billion. According to Minister Steenhuisen, this strong performance reflects the resilience and competitiveness of South African agriculture despite an uncertain global trade environment and persistent domestic logistical constraints.

The growth was driven by strong export performances across a range of products, including grapes, apples, pears, maize, wine, apricots, cherries, peaches, sugar, wool, fruit juices, nuts, avocados, pineapples, guavas, mangos and soya beans.

Delivering jobs and economic growth

Minister Steenhuisen said that the growth in agricultural exports reinforces the government's view that agriculture remains one of South Africa's most important drivers of economic growth, rural development and job creation.

"When the National Development Plan was launched in 2012, South African agriculture supported approximately 720,000 jobs. Today, that number stands at roughly 960,000. The

creation of nearly 300,000 jobs over this period is a significant achievement, particularly given the structural constraints that continue to affect the sector.

“Imagine what more could be achieved if we fully unlocked the productive potential of agriculture through improved infrastructure, greater investment certainty, stronger logistics, expanded market access, and broader land ownership and financing opportunities,” Minister Steenhuisen said.

Expanding and protecting export markets

Speaking at the Hortgro Symposium on Monday morning, the minister emphasised that continued export growth depends on South Africa’s ability to secure and protect access to global markets.

“Market access is absolutely central to the future growth of South African agriculture. We cannot expand our agricultural economy if we are unable to continuously open, deepen and defend access to international markets,” stated Minister Steenhuisen.

He noted that the deciduous fruit industry already exports more than 60% of its production to over 100 global destinations, with major growth opportunities increasingly emerging in Asia and the Far East.

“The Far East and Asia already account for approximately 35% of South African apple exports and remain among the most important growth frontiers for the industry,” he said.

The minister highlighted several recent breakthroughs secured through collaboration between government and industry, including the landmark Stone Fruit Protocol concluded with China, which simultaneously opened access for peaches, nectarines, plums, apricots and prunes.

“This was not a routine achievement. It was a major strategic breakthrough that unlocked access to one of the world’s largest and most valuable consumer markets,” he added.

South Africa has also successfully reopened fresh apple exports to Thailand under strict phytosanitary conditions, while ongoing engagements continue to pursue expanded access for cherries and other high-value products into Asian markets.

Minister Steenhuisen said that these developments demonstrate what can be achieved when industry and government work together with a common purpose.

“It is the government’s responsibility to create the enabling environment that allows agriculture to grow and compete. That means reducing unnecessary red tape, improving regulatory efficiency, strengthening biosecurity systems, modernising legislation, improving infrastructure

and logistics, and aggressively pursuing export opportunities for South African producers,” he said.

Logistics constraints remain a major threat

While export values remain strong, Minister Steenhuisen cautioned that persistent logistical inefficiencies continue to undermine South Africa's competitiveness.

Operational delays and congestion at the Port of Cape Town during the peak table grape season forced costly cargo rerouting and imposed major financial losses on producers and exporters.

“These are not minor operational inconveniences. For a high-value perishable export industry, logistics efficiency is existential.

“When fruit misses shipping windows, producers do not simply lose time. They lose value, market confidence and profitability. That is why fixing logistics and infrastructure remains one of the most important economic reforms South Africa must undertake if we want to unlock agricultural growth at scale,” Minister Steenhuisen said.

The minister noted that South Africa already occupies a strong position globally in apples, pears and stone fruit exports, but that substantial opportunities remain to expand into higher-value markets, deepen value chains, increase beneficiation and create additional employment opportunities across the agricultural economy.

“The challenge before us is not simply to preserve what we have built. It is to scale it. We must deepen value chains, strengthen climate resilience, invest in science and innovation, improve infrastructure, support emerging producers, and ensure that South African agriculture remains globally competitive in an increasingly demanding world,” Minister Steenhuisen concluded.

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