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MEDIA STATEMENT

12 JUNE 2025

MINISTER JOHN STEENHUISEN

OPENING ADDRESS—RED MEAT ABATTOIR ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Theme: *Handled with Care for Confident Consumption*

Chairperson, executive members of the Red Meat Abattoir Association,
Industry partners, colleagues from across the value chain,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to open today's proceedings under a theme that speaks directly to the heart of public trust: *Handled with Care for Confident Consumption.*

In that phrase is a powerful compact, between producer and consumer, regulator and citizen, farmer and nation. It affirms that the journey of red meat—from farm to abattoir to plate—is one that must be governed not only by science and standards, but by conscience and care.

When consumers trust the meat they eat, they are not just investing in a product, they are investing in an industry. That is why everything we do, from slaughterhouse protocols to traceability systems, must be underpinned by a relentless focus on quality, transparency, and food safety.

Rebuilding confidence in a crucial industry

We are gathered here today at a time when consumer confidence is both fragile and fiercely contested. Misinformation, food scares, and supply chain breaches in global markets have taught us one thing: *confidence is easy to lose and hard to win back.*

South Africa's red meat industry has every reason to be proud of the standards it upholds. However, that confidence must be earned again and again, with every animal handled, every facility audited, every inspector trained, and every export consignment certified.

Consumers do not just want meat; they want meat they can believe in—and belief is built through systems of care.

The role of the abattoir in national biosecurity

Your work sits at the frontline of our country's biosecurity system. The abattoir is not just a processing site, it is a checkpoint for public health, a sentinel for animal welfare, and a mirror of the values that underpin our food system.

If there are gaps in how we operate abattoirs, whether in hygiene, record-keeping, carcass classification, or worker safety, then we expose not only our markets but our communities.

This is why, under my leadership, the Department of Agriculture is intensifying its inspection systems, modernising legislation, and working closely with provincial veterinary services to ensure that standards are not merely set, but enforced. Compliance must not be treated as a formality. It is a public good.

We are also prioritising upgrades to small-scale and rural abattoirs, ensuring that they are equipped to meet basic statutory and food safety requirements. If we are serious about expanding market access to emerging farmers, we must build a system that is inclusive and compliant.

A whole-of-chain biosecurity approach

Biosecurity is not a siloed issue. It must be embedded across the entire value chain, from pre-slaughter monitoring to post-mortem data collection.

This is especially important as we confront animal disease threats like foot-and-mouth disease, African swine fever, and zoonotic risks. And it is particularly important as we strengthen our export credentials, where one outbreak can trigger a devastating market suspension.

It is for this reason that we are reforming our disease surveillance system, revitalising partnerships with the private sector and investing in digital platforms that can flag biosecurity threats early and allow for rapid, science-based response.

However, as we enhance our commitment to food safety, we must also remain vigilant on the global threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Responsible use of antibiotics in livestock production is not only essential for animal health, but also for protecting human health. We are actively working with veterinarians, industry players, and health authorities to align our practices with international guidelines for responsible antimicrobial stewardship.

The importance of market access

Handled with care must also mean *marketed with care.*

South Africa's red meat industry faces fierce competition on the global stage. Yet our ability to secure and grow export markets depends on our credibility—on how well we meet international sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards, how we document our compliance, and how quickly we can respond to trade queries.

As Minister, I am working hard to negotiate new export opportunities for South African meat, including in high-value Asian markets. But market access is not just about diplomacy. It is about demonstrating that our industry is organised, disciplined, and capable of guaranteeing product integrity.

In an age of digital consumers and heightened public awareness, transparency is no longer optional, it is essential. From clear labelling to open data on animal origin and welfare, we must equip consumers with the information they need to make confident, informed choices. Traceability is not just about market access; it is about public confidence.

Strengthening the partnership between industry and the department

We will not succeed alone. If we want to grow this industry in a way that is both ethical and globally competitive, we need a stronger partnership between government and industry.

That means:

- better alignment on standards and enforcement;
- clearer pathways for compliance support, especially for emerging producers;
- stronger co-funding of infrastructure upgrades, certification services, and cold-chain logistics; and
- joint advocacy on the international stage, where our voice carries more weight when it is unified.

As Minister, I commit to making the department a partner in your success—not just a regulator, but an enabler.

A future-facing industry: Sustainability and climate readiness

While our focus today is on safety and care, we must also prepare for tomorrow's challenge: sustainability.

The global conversation is shifting toward carbon impact, water use, and climate resilience. The red meat industry must be part of the solution. This means documenting our sustainability efforts, investing in climate-smart infrastructure, and participating in science-based targets for responsible production.

We must show not only that we are producing meat, but that we are doing so in a way that respects planetary boundaries and enhances long-term food system resilience.

Handled with care—for confident consumption. That is more than a theme. It is a test.

It asks: Are we taking care of the animals? The workers? The data? The consumers? The market? And are we taking care of the future?

Today, we recommit to that care, and we do so with the full weight of a partnership between government, industry, veterinarians, scientists, and citizens.

Let us be bold in our standards, transparent in our systems, and united in our purpose. Because when confidence is high, the future is strong!

Thank you.

-End-

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Issued by: The Ministry of Agriculture