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“A Vision for Agriculture in South Africa”

Address by Minister John Steenhuisen

AVI Africa Conference

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Colleagues in agriculture, trade, and development,

It is a privilege to speak with you today about a topic that is not only close to my heart, but vital to the survival and success of our country: The future of agriculture in South Africa.

Agriculture is not just an economic sector. It is the heartbeat of rural development. It is the defender of food sovereignty. It is the engine that can drive job creation, empower communities, and unlock South Africa's full potential.

I would like to share with you my vision for agriculture in South Africa—a vision rooted in partnership, driven by innovation, and shaped by the lived realities of our farmers, processors, traders, and consumers.

This vision is built around seven strategic pillars, developed through wide consultation and reflection, and firmly aligned with our national goals. These pillars will guide our department's work in the years to come.

The first is building partnerships for growth.

Agriculture succeeds when Government and industry work together. As minister, I am committed to positioning the Department of Agriculture as a catalyst for partnership. We are strengthening collaboration with commodity bodies, creating structured forums with organised agriculture, improving turnaround times on requests for support, and providing clear, timely communication on government interventions. Only through genuine public-private partnerships can we grow the sector, improve food security, create jobs, and bring investment to rural South Africa.



The second is creating a modern and progressive legal framework.

Agricultural innovation is moving fast. Our laws, unfortunately, are not. We have launched a full legislative and regulatory review. Outdated laws will be repealed. Ineffective regulations will be scrapped. Red tape that serves no purpose will be removed. We will streamline compliance processes, ensure that new legislation is properly canvassed with the sector, and support the adoption of game-changing technologies like gene editing, remote sensing, and traceability tools. Agriculture must be empowered by policy, not hindered by it.

The third pillar is expanding market access.

Market access is the difference between survival and success for any farmer. We are committed to leveraging trade agreements like the SADC-EU EPA and BRICS to unlock new destinations for our exports. We will fast-track export protocols, enhance biosecurity to meet international standards, and ensure our international outreach is professional, responsive and strategic. We will build a dedicated export register to track and remove bottlenecks. We are also coordinating more closely with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) to resolve delays in notes verbales and supporting exporters in accessing new opportunities.

The fourth pillar is supporting all farmers, from subsistence to commercial.

Whether you are a communal farmer in Limpopo or a commercial citrus grower in the Eastern Cape, you matter. Our support must reflect the diversity of South Africa's farmers. We are expanding blended finance options in partnership with the Land Bank and international investors, accelerating land titling to give emerging farmers collateral and dignity, using state-owned land creatively to bring new entrants into production, supporting mechanisation and precision agriculture, and will introduce a farmer insurance product that protects small producers against shocks. Support will be impact-driven. We will measure projects by their results: Number of jobs created, production expanded, lives changed.

The fifth pillar is recognising that biosecurity is everybody's business.

We have lost too much ground because of preventable outbreaks. Foot-and-mouth disease, Citrus black spot, and now highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI)—these are not just diseases. They are economic shocks. They threaten jobs, exports, food security, and national confidence.

That is why we are acting.

In response to HPAI, the department has launched an urgent, coordinated vaccination roll-out plan. This is the first time South Africa is deploying vaccines at this scale to combat avian influenza. Our vaccination team, comprised of poultry specialist vets from the University of Pretoria, along with the Agricultural Research Council, has received a list of farms to be vaccinated and is prioritising high-risk areas and commercial flocks to contain the virus and prevent further culling. We have secured vaccine supply, ensured cold chain capacity, and are building in traceability and reporting mechanisms as part of a wider preparedness strategy. In addition, we have appointed 50 animal health technicians on a short-term contract to assist with the vaccination roll-out, and we expect induction and refresher training to begin next week.

Regarding the FMD outbreak, we have ordered vaccines to cover the KwaZulu-Natal area, while assessment, as well forward and backward tracing of the outbreak in Gauteng is ongoing.

These plans are not only about responding to outbreaks, but also about building permanent infrastructure to manage future risks.

More broadly, we are establishing a Biosecurity Council that will bring together the South African Police Service (SAPS), veterinarians, scientists, the Border Management Authority, and industry. We are rolling out a farm-to-fork national traceability system for livestock. We are upgrading Onderstepoort Biological Products to restore vaccine self-sufficiency. We are enhancing rural veterinary services and emergency response, and reintroducing the dip tank model in partnership with traditional leaders. Biosecurity is not an agricultural issue alone. It is a national security issue, and we are treating it as such.

The sixth pillar is advocacy across government. The success of agriculture depends on services beyond the Department of Agriculture. We are engaging with Transnet to fix port inefficiencies, with the Department of Water and Sanitation to speed up dam expansion and water licensing, with SAPS to improve rural safety, with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) to fix local infrastructure, and with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) to boost international representation and facilitate foreign investment. Agriculture must have a voice across government, and I intend to be that voice.

The seventh pillar is improving food security.

We must end hunger in our lifetime. The 2024 National Food and Nutrition Security Survey shows rising household food insecurity. One-third of all food produced is wasted, while millions go hungry. Our 2024–2029 Food Security Plan will target the most vulnerable areas using real data; invest in school and community gardens; build partnerships to tackle food waste; and support nutrition-sensitive farming systems. Our commitment is simple: No South African should go to bed hungry in a country as agriculturally rich as ours.

Allow me now to speak directly to one of our most important agricultural sectors: Poultry. The poultry industry is not only a key protein source for our people. It is an economic anchor. Its gross income stands at an astonishing R79,95 billion. It supports approximately 134,000 jobs. It contributes 17,8% to our agricultural gross domestic product (GDP), and it is projected to grow by 5,8% annually.

These are not just numbers. These are livelihoods. These are families. These are opportunities.

We are committed to fully implementing the Poultry Sector Master Plan. This includes expanding black-owned broiler and egg production, protecting against illegal and unfair imports, investing in veterinary surveillance and disease response, supporting abattoir upgrades and cold chain improvements, and ensuring that poultry farmers, big and small, can compete fairly.

The HPAI outbreak has shown us just how vulnerable this industry is. However, it has also shown how quickly we can respond when we act with urgency and unity. The vaccination campaign, now underway, is just the start. We will continue to work side by side with producers, retailers, and consumers to safeguard the industry's long-term future.

This is a vision grounded in action. It is not built on slogans. It is built on service.

It is a vision where our farmers have dignity and support, our agricultural products are safe, sought after, and sold around the world, our children grow up nourished and hopeful, and agriculture becomes the backbone of a resilient, inclusive South African economy.

Let us grow together. Let us lead together. Let us farm with purpose.

Thank you.

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