

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MINISTER JOHN STEENHUISEN

RSA Group Stakeholder Dinner

24 July 2025

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the fresh produce industry, friends and partners,

It is an honour to join you tonight at this RSA Group Stakeholder Dinner. I want to thank the organisers for bringing together such a crucial mass of leadership from across South Africa's fresh produce sector. Your presence here is not just a sign of commitment to your businesses and enterprises. It reflects the role you play in feeding our nation and keeping the wheels of our economy turning.

I stand before you fully aware of both the potential and the pressure this sector carries. You are not here for platitudes or vague promises. You are here because you know exactly what is working, what is not, and what is at risk. And I respect that deeply.

Let me begin by acknowledging something we all understand intuitively—South Africa's open market system for fresh produce is a national asset. It functions efficiently, it is resilient, and it is the backbone of food security for millions of our fellow citizens. Most importantly, it does all of this at zero cost to the State. In fact, it stands out globally for being a self-sustaining system that empowers producers of all sizes, feeds the formal and informal economy, and enables real price discovery that reflects market realities rather than bureaucratic interference.

However, this very system is now under threat.

The long-standing and well-documented failures in infrastructure, from crumbling roads and unreliable power to underperforming ports and degraded fresh produce markets, pose an existential risk. This is not news to you. You have lived it. You have worked around it, and increasingly, you are reaching the limits of what can be absorbed privately. I want you to know—we hear you.

Let me speak frankly about what we are doing, and what more we intend to do.

First, on infrastructure: we are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge facing our freight and logistics system. But neither are we standing still. We are engaging with The Presidency and relevant ministers to ensure that agri-logistics is recognised as a strategic priority within the work of the National Logistics Crisis

Committee. Through this engagement, we are advocating for the inclusion of agricultural corridors, particularly those linking key horticultural regions to domestic and export markets, in the Corridor Recovery Programme under the National Freight Logistics Roadmap. This includes calls to prioritise the revitalisation of rural branch rail lines, address inland cold chain bottlenecks, and improve port performance, especially in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape where produce delays are most acute.

As minister, I have taken concrete steps to address the urgent dysfunction in our fresh produce markets. In May and June this year, I wrote formally to the Executive Mayor of Johannesburg and the City Manager of eThekweni, urging them to prioritise capital upgrades and maintenance of the Johannesburg and Durban markets, respectively. These are among the most crucial trading hubs for fresh produce in the country, and their deterioration has had unacceptable consequences for food safety, pricing, and producer sustainability.

I also engaged with Minister Parks Tau to assess the viability of a R3,2 billion "Smart Market" proposal submitted by the Joburg Market to the Department of Agriculture. This ambitious initiative seeks to modernise infrastructure, digitalise market operations, and build integrated cold chain and logistics systems. I have requested Minister Tau's guidance on how this project aligns with national industrial funding streams and where our departments can unlock joint support.

Beyond these interventions, I have invited both municipalities to join a collaborative revitalisation process that includes industry players like Potatoes SA. The message is clear: Fresh produce markets are national economic assets, and they require shared stewardship between all spheres of government and the private sector.

Second, we are reviewing all regulatory bottlenecks that slow down investment in storage, transport, and market infrastructure. If we are to remain a competitive producer-exporter country, we must align our permitting, zoning, and licensing regimes with the needs of an industry that moves faster than the public service does.

Now, turning to trade.

You are all acutely aware of the recent imposition of 30% tariffs by the United States government on a range of South African exports, including citrus. This is a deeply troubling development, and one that we have not taken lightly.

While the AGOA preferences technically remain on the books, these tariffs—in practical terms—render the agreement inert. Let me be clear: South African agriculture did not deserve this treatment. We do not dump, we do not distort, and we do not play geopolitical games with food.

As you know, the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) leads our formal engagement with the United States, and we continue to work hand in hand with Minister Tau and his team to ensure that the full impact on the agricultural sector is well understood. My department is supplying the evidence, the case studies, and the real-world perspectives that only industry can provide.

We are supporting proposals for tariff exemptions during off-season windows, as well as exploring transitional mechanisms such as limited-duty quotas, parallel phytosanitary agreements, and in some cases, reciprocal access to our own market for United States produce, provided our biosecurity standards are respected.

We are strengthening alliances. Through the Southern Hemisphere Association of Fresh Fruit Exporters, we are working with peer countries like Chile, Peru, and New Zealand to jointly lobby for fair and stable trade treatment of fresh produce. This multilateral coordination sends a strong message.

Let us not waste this moment. If it takes a jolt to remind us of the risk of overreliance, then let it be a productive jolt.

However, the real solution lies not just in playing defence, but in going on the offensive. This is why we are doubling down on market access expansion.

Over the past six months alone, we have finalised new phytosanitary protocols for the export of avocados to China; table grapes to Vietnam and the Philippines; and maize to India. Negotiations are at an advanced stage with Indonesia, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Our goal is simple—to ensure that no South African fruit producer is ever left dependent on the goodwill of a single trading partner.

We are also building institutional capacity at home. We are strengthening our plant health systems, expanding traceability capabilities, and digitalising our export certification platforms to align with the European Union's Green Deal and Asia's growing demand for sustainability-linked imports. These investments are not just defensive; they are the launchpad for new growth.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The story of South African agriculture has always been one of ingenuity, grit, and partnership. We have overcome political transition, trade embargoes, droughts, pandemics, and port crises. We will overcome these current headwinds too.

However, we will do it faster, and better, if we move together. My department is open for business, open for reform, and open for ideas. I see the RSA Group not just as stakeholders, but as strategic partners in building the agricultural economy of the future.

Let us use this evening not just to reflect, but to reimagine. Let us reaffirm our commitment to a market system that is fair, open, and fiercely competitive. Let us recommit to the hard work of rebuilding the infrastructure that underpins it.

And above all, let us never lose sight of the fact that in every crate of produce moved, in every trade route defended, and in every informal vendor supplied, we are doing something far bigger than business.

We are feeding a nation.

Thank you.