

Keynote Address
Minister of Agriculture, Mr John Steenhuisen

**Opportunities in developing the bioeconomy—new industries and
maximising and diversifying existing industries**

**ANCA Summit, Mount Nelson Hotel, Cape Town,
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Distinguished Guests,
Esteemed Investors,
Innovators,
Friends of the bioeconomy
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Earlier this year, at the gathering of agricultural ministers in Berlin, I shared South Africa's vision for its G20 Presidency. This vision did not start from scratch; it builds squarely on the strong foundation laid by Brazil—the 10 High-Level Principles for the Bioeconomy.

Our focus has been, and remains, on advancing the bioeconomy in ways that promote inclusive economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity.

Ben will elaborate on the outcomes of our G20 Presidency, but already we are seeing the ripple effects of this work—not only within the G20, but across Africa and extending into global platforms like 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30) and beyond.

The transformative power of the bioeconomy

We recognise—but need everyone to come to the same conclusion—the bioeconomy offers a truly transformative pathway to address the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. The bioeconomy is the core solution. It enables resilient, responsible, and inclusive growth, enhances human wellbeing, and reduces poverty. Crucially, it supports climate mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and is central to ensuring food security and nutrition.

Yet, we face a critical inefficiency: according to the Center for International Forestry Research—World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), Africa currently captures less than 10% of the value of its biomass. While there are undeniable reasons behind this, such as gaps in science and technology skills, infrastructure, innovation funding, and enabling policy, this disparity presents us with a remarkable opportunity. We must invest strategically in adding value to the raw biomass that our continent produces, so that we can derive greater economic benefit for our people from our agricultural productivity.

Across the full agricultural value chain, bio-innovation can deliver a transformative impact. This includes:

- crop and livestock improvement, including indigenous species, to withstand climate-related stresses;
- agro-processing and integrated food and nutrition research;
- development of animal vaccines and energy crops; expansion of bio-controls and biofertilisers;
- growth in aquaculture, soil conservation, and water resource management;
- critically, building high-value skills and capabilities and systems to drive agro-innovation.

The bioeconomy also brings circular economic principles to life—reminding us that **“waste” is only waste if we waste it.**

Let me share a few inspiring examples from right here in this province:

- Strawberry farmers are now using cellulose-based bioplastic sheets to protect their crops. After harvest, these sheets are tilled into the soil and biodegrade within months—saving costs and improving environmental and human health outcomes. Thanks to collaboration between the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), farmers, and manufacturers, these sheets are now produced more affordably than fossil-fuel alternatives;
- Vineyards are using kelp and seaweed-based fertilisers that have boosted yields by up to 60%. These biobased inputs improve soil structure, stimulate microbial activity, enhance nutrient availability, and increase water retention. And because kelp forests sequester carbon, scaling this industry sustainably supports broader climate and biodiversity goals.

G20 as an accelerator for global bioeconomy

While I could speak endlessly about this ingenuity, we must acknowledge the existential urgency of our transition. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scientist survey, we are on course for 3,1 degree Celsius warming this century.

The impacts of extreme weather events, sea level rise, and biodiversity loss are likely to be catastrophic, and unfortunately, Africa and the developing world will be hit the hardest. That means some of the very same solutions we are relying on like regenerative agriculture, bioplastics, biofuels and replacing all fossil fuel-based products, risk being undermined before they reach scale.

Urgency is not just about seizing the opportunity of the bioeconomy; it is about safeguarding it before it slips away. It is about investing in the ecological infrastructure that underpins both our current economy and the more sustainable one we aspire to build.

Investing in the bioeconomy

As you hear from experts and practitioners throughout the day, a few priorities will stand out as essential to this moment:

- We need bioeconomy finance at scale, moving from grants to serious institutional investment;
- We need “lifeboat” strategies to support high-risk, high-reward innovation;
- We must align trade with climate and nature-positive outcomes; and
- We must accelerate innovation ecosystems that can commercialise and scale to have the necessary impacts.

For the agricultural sector, financing the bioeconomy on a large scale is not just a choice, it is the driving force behind significant transformation. I see it as the engine that will help mitigate risks across the industry, foster genuine resilience against climate challenges, and generate wealth all the way down to the farm level. This goes beyond simply distributing funds; it represents a fundamental shift that will elevate agriculture from a high-risk, commodity-driven sector to a globally competitive, resilient, and value-adding powerhouse. It is about turning environmental care into tangible economic benefits for every producer.

The benefits are clear: we build resilience by investing in the tools that farmers need today, such as bio-inputs and climate-resilient crops; we create new revenue opportunities by supporting local infrastructure that transforms “waste” into valuable products like bioplastics and bioenergy; and most importantly, we guarantee fair access to affordable, long-term capital for smallholders through innovative solutions like Bio-Bonds, ensuring that those who feed us become the primary beneficiaries of the wealth generated from their biological resources.

Thank you for showing up, for investing, and for building the bioeconomy through your efforts, big and small.

End.