

**Keynote Address by Minister John Steenhuisen (MP), Minister of Agriculture,  
South Africa**

**International Berry Organisation Conference – Cape Town International  
Convention Centre (CTICC), 25 September 2025**

Excellencies, distinguished guests, industry leaders, colleagues and friends,

It is a privilege to address you all at this important gathering of the International Berry Organisation here in Cape Town. South Africa is honoured to host you, and I wish to extend my appreciation to the IBO and to industry partners for bringing this event to African soil for the very first time.

This milestone is no small achievement, and it speaks volumes about how far the berry sector in South Africa, and particularly our blueberry industry, has come in such a short period of time.

When I look around this room, I see the global trailblazers of the berry industry, innovators in genetics, technology and market development. Here in South Africa, our farmers are planting the very best blueberry varieties and harnessing them to build something dynamic and new. That is why we can stand shoulder to shoulder with the most established producers, not only keeping pace, but increasingly ready to set the pace in the years ahead. This builds on a proud tradition: for decades, South Africa has earned a reputation for exporting fruit of outstanding quality and flavour. Our citrus, grapes, apples, and our pears are recognised in markets around the world. Blueberries are no different. They have become one of our most exciting export success stories, a symbol of how innovation, quality and hard work can create opportunities for farmers and communities alike.

Indeed, the numbers tell the story. In 2018, our national blueberry production stood at less than 3 000 tons. By 2022, it had grown to more than 21 000 tons. Earlier this year, severe black frost in Groblersdal wiped out between 60% and 70% of early blueberry cultivars, causing losses of an estimated 2 000 to 3 000 tons of fruit, while warmer, late winters in northern regions delayed flowering and pushed harvests back by

several weeks. These disruptions have tested our resilience, yet even in the face of such setbacks, exports still rose by 7% year-on-year to surpass 22 500 tons, a sign of the industry's strength and adaptability, with volumes projected to exceed 46 000 tons by 2033.

The blueberry industry is not just about exports and foreign exchange. It is about people. According to a Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) study, blueberries have the highest labour absorption factor per hectare in all of South African agriculture, more than four jobs per hectare. That means thousands of families in some of our most vulnerable rural areas now rely on the berry value chain for livelihoods, dignity and hope.

But we must also be frank about the challenges. Profitability has been under pressure in recent seasons, with producers squeezed by rising costs, currency volatility and logistics disruptions that affect both market timing and returns. The BFAP blueberry benchmarking data confirms that net farm income per hectare is highly sensitive to cultivar choice, market timing and quality management. This is why Government, industry and our research partners must continue to work together to help farmers remain competitive, efficient and resilient.

I want to acknowledge the partnership between the Department of Agriculture and the South African blueberry industry, represented so ably by Berries ZA. Together, we are making great strides to open new export markets in the short to medium term. In recent seasons, we have secured access for blueberries into markets across Asia and the Middle East, with protocols either finalised or nearing completion in countries such as India, Israel and Vietnam. Negotiations are also advancing with Thailand and South Korea, two markets with enormous potential.

Following my visit to China in July this year, I can share with you that the General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) has confirmed they are currently conducting the risk assessment for both cherries and blueberries. They indicated that feedback to our department is expected in due course. This is a promising sign: that one of the world's largest and most dynamic markets may soon be within reach for South African blueberries.

Looking at the global picture, it is clear that demand is still growing strongly. In fact, just five markets, the USA, the EU, China, the UK and Canada, accounted for nearly 90% of global fresh blueberry consumption in 2023. This concentration makes trade policy and logistics all the more important. Peru, China and Morocco are also reshaping supply dynamics. Our competitiveness will depend on how well we manage our harvest windows, quality and logistics against these global players.

Moreover, we must recognise that new demand is rising close to home. Africa's cities are growing faster than anywhere else, and with that growth comes a bigger appetite for high-quality fresh produce. The African Continental Free Trade Area isn't just about trade deals, it's about unlocking these regional markets. Recent reports show that Africa already accounts for about USD12 billion in fresh produce exports globally, and intra-African produce trade is accelerating as barriers fall. As middle classes expand, so does demand for nutritious, health-oriented fruit, including berries. From improving value chains and enhancing logistics, to enforcing food safety and reducing trade frictions, these are the levers we will pull to ensure that our berry growers benefit not only from export markets far away, but also from buyers in Africa itself.

While blueberries have been the headline story, they are not the only berry making waves in South Africa. Our raspberry industry, though still smaller in scale, has expanded steadily in recent years. Raspberries are highly valued in international markets, and their cultivation here adds diversity to our horticultural portfolio. This diversification matters: it spreads risk for farmers, creates new employment opportunities, and positions South Africa to supply a wider range of premium berries to discerning consumers worldwide. Alongside blackberries and strawberries, raspberries are helping to build a more balanced and resilient berry sector.

Our Strategic Plan as a department makes clear commitments: to expand research and innovation with our partners; to reform logistics so that our farmers can reach markets faster and more reliably; to invest in water-efficient production systems that ensure sustainability and to strengthen job creation through labour-intensive horticulture. These priorities are not abstract. They are the very tools that will help South Africa's berry sector secure its place as a trusted supplier in global markets.

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends, it is fitting that this important event is taking place here in Cape Town, a city that stands at the crossroads of Africa and the world, a city that has always been a gateway for trade and exchange.

I wish you well in your discussions over the coming days. May this gathering deepen partnerships, strengthen knowledge-sharing, and inspire bold steps for the future of the global berry industry. South Africa is proud to be your host, and proud to stand with you in shaping a thriving, sustainable and inclusive future for berries worldwide.

I thank you.