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Speech by Minister John Steenhuisen, MP

"The Role of Beekeeping in Sustainable Agriculture and National Food Security"

Chairperson of the South African Bee Industry Organisation (SABIO), Ms Tumi Mobu,
SABIO board members,
Beekeepers, farmers, researchers, academics, environmental stewards,
Government officials,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to speak to you today on a topic that is too often overlooked but increasingly crucial to our agricultural resilience, biodiversity, and food security—the role of beekeeping in sustainable agriculture and national food systems.

When we think of agriculture, we often think of land, water, livestock, and crops. However, without pollinators, particularly bees, our food system simply would not function. In fact, the further we study the role of bees, the more we realise that they are not just contributors to our agricultural system, they are foundational to its very survival.

Globally, bees contribute to the pollination of over 75% of the crops that feed us. From fruit and vegetables to oilseeds and nuts, bees are a silent, industrious force at the heart of our food system. In South Africa, their role is even more pronounced, given the unique biodiversity of our landscapes and the importance of pollinator-dependent crops in both our domestic food supply and agricultural exports.

Let me highlight three key dimensions of why beekeeping must now be seen as a strategic national priority, not just a niche practice for hobbyists or specialist farmers.

The first dimension is the role of beekeeping in food security. Food security is about more than calories. It is about diversity, nutrition, affordability, and resilience. Bees are essential for the pollination of a wide range of crops, apples, citrus, avocados, sunflowers, macadamias, and vegetables, to name but a few. A reduction in pollinator activity leads to lower yields, reduced crop quality, and ultimately, higher prices for consumers. Furthermore, the decline of bees may also affect the volume of fruit we export to our trading partners. In a

country like ours, where millions already struggle with food insecurity, such a decline would have far-reaching consequences. For our smallholder farmers, pollination shortfalls translate into lower incomes and greater vulnerability.

Beyond pollination, beekeeping also plays a direct role in livelihoods and local economies. With relatively low land and capital requirements, beekeeping offers a viable entry point for youth, women and rural entrepreneurs. It can be practised alongside other forms of agriculture, creating economic multipliers within communities. Honey, beeswax, propolis, and other hive products can generate income through local markets, agro-processing, and even exports. As such, beekeeping is not only a tool for ecological sustainability, it is also a means of economic empowerment. It fits squarely within the principles of climate-smart farming and inclusive rural development.

Our national food system depends on healthy and productive pollinator populations. Protecting bees is not just an environmental issue, it is a national food security imperative. When we invest in beekeeping, we are investing in the very infrastructure of food production. The second dimension is the intrinsic relationship between beekeeping and biodiversity conservation. Healthy ecosystems produce healthy food, and bees are nature's most visible and effective biodiversity champions. Through their daily movements between plants, bees support seed dispersal, soil regeneration, and the reproduction of wild flora. They play an essential role in maintaining ecological balance.

However, bee populations in South Africa and around the world are under mounting threat. Habitat loss owing to urban sprawl, deforestation, and monoculture farming is reducing the availability of forage. The misuse of pesticides and herbicides, especially neonicotinoids and glyphosates, is weakening the bees' immune systems and reducing colony viability. Climate change is introducing new stressors, altering flowering times and creating mismatches in pollination cycles. Invasive pests such as the capensis clone, varroa mite, and American foulbrood have devastated colonies in some parts of our country.

As Government, we are responding to these challenges by investing in sustainable land-use practices, reducing chemical exposure through stricter pesticide regulation, and supporting indigenous vegetation corridors that sustain pollinator networks. Furthermore, our government will continue to intensify the implementation and enforcement of the regulatory framework (Control measures relating to beekeeping) to manage bee diseases and the capensis challenge. Our conservation programmes must now fully integrate pollinator protection. Beekeeping must be placed at the intersection of agricultural policy,

environmental stewardship, and economic development. It is not an auxiliary activity; it is a bridge between ecosystems and agriculture.

In terms of research, our department has commissioned the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) to conduct research on bees. The project specifically focuses on the surveillance of American foulbrood (AFB) in honeybee colonies in South Africa. This aims to protect beekeeping and pollination services to ensure healthy beekeeping practices. This research will form the basis for the development of a consolidated National Beekeeping Strategy for South Africa.

There is also a need to grow and professionalise our national apiculture sector. South Africa's formal beekeeping industry is still relatively small. Fewer than 2,000 registered beekeepers service a growing demand for pollination services, especially in high-value horticultural sectors, such as almonds, macadamias, and blueberries. As these industries expand, the demand for managed bee colonies is projected to exceed the capacity of our current apiculture base.

As a department, we are also encouraging the domestication and management of indigenous honeybee species, such as *Apis mellifera scutellata* (African honeybee), which is found in the central and northern part of the country and *Apis mellifera capensis* (Cape honeybee), which is found in the southern part of the country. These species are better adapted to local environments and climatic stress.

We recognise the enormous potential of beekeeping to transform rural economies, support sustainable agriculture, and drive ecological stewardship. With the right investment, regulations, and coordination, the apiculture sector can become one of the most dynamic and inclusive segments of our agricultural economy.

Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come to bring beekeeping from the margins to the mainstream. Bees are not optional. They are central to a resilient food system. Investing in beekeeping is not only about producing honey, but also about producing futures. Futures in which food is abundant, ecosystems are healthy, and livelihoods are sustainable.

Let us protect our bees. Let us empower our beekeepers. And let us recognise their indispensable role in the broader vision of South African agriculture.

I thank you.