**Virtual Keynote Address by Minister John Steenhuisen**

***Subtropical Marketing Symposium – 5 November 2025***

Good morning to all delegates joining the symposium, and a warm greeting to our partners across the avocado, mango and litchi industries and to every producer and exporter helping to keep South Africa's subtropical fruit among the finest in the world.

I wish I could be there with you in Nelspruit, but I'm grateful that technology allows me to join you virtually, and to speak about how we can strengthen our competitiveness together.

**Keeping Our Markets and Opening New Ones**

When I assumed office last year, I made a simple promise: that South African agriculture would compete not just on volume, but on value, and that we would measure our progress by the markets we hold and the new ones we open.

Nowhere is this more relevant than in the subtropical sector.

Let's look at where we stand today:

Our avocado industry produces around 155 000 tons a year, and nearly half of that is exported as fresh fruit. Of the fresh exports, 75% go to the European Union and Russia, 22% to the United Kingdom, and a smaller but growing 3% to Africa and the Middle East. New markets such as India, China and Japan still account for less than 1%, but they hold enormous potential. India presents a substantial opportunity for our avocado growers, especially from May to August when South African exporters can offer a competitive alternative to the South American product, supplying large-sized avocados to Indian consumers during a key window. Japan's avocado consumption is also growing steadily due to increased awareness of its health benefits and versatility. Japanese consumers and retailers place significant value on sustainability and traceability in food supply chains, and we are well-equipped to meet these standards, but we need stronger coordination between Government, industry players and logistics operators.

Our mango sector is one of the few industries where growth can directly benefit emerging farmers, processors and rural employment in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. Out of an average 81 700 tons of mangos produced annually, around 7% is exported fresh, 31% sold locally, and 62% processed into juice, dried fruit and achar. Nearly all exports, 99%, currently go to the Middle East, while access to the EU and UK remains limited, under 1%. India remains a small but promising frontier. The biggest technical constraint for our mango exports is postharvest treatment capacity, however, I am a big supporter of public-private partnerships to assist where possible, for example, the opportunity exists for the PPECB, Transnet and private packhouses to establish regional export-grade treatment and cold-storage facilities in Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

Although our litchi sector is smaller in volume – we produce about 5 100 tons per year, and export about half of that – it is one of our most promising subtropical exports, with strong early-season competitiveness in terms of timing, quality and reliability, and proven phytosanitary compliance in EU and the United States markets. However, market expansion has been constrained by the lengthy and sequential process of pest risk analysis (PRA), often taking several years due to data gaps, resource shortages and inter-governmental negotiation delays.

Accelerating these PRAs can unlock new high-value Asian and Middle Eastern markets and diversify export risk away from the EU and the UK. In January next year, I will be doing a working tour of the Middle East and will use the opportunity to hold bilateral meetings with my counterparts to pursue various market access applications, including leveraging the department's strengthened Plant Health and Market Access Unit to fast-track PRAs for the litchi sector.

We are globally competitive, but not to our full potential, and our future growth will come from diversification, reaching beyond our traditional destinations into Asia and the Middle East, leveraging our agricultural attachés to promote technical inspections and virtual site audits, and moving up the value chain in processing and branding.

That's why I've been prioritising a market diversification strategy for our country's agricultural exports, from the first shipments of 21 tons of South African avocados from Westfalia Fruit in Shanghai on 8 October 2024, to Japan's long-awaited approval for

Hass avocados, to our continuing engagement on tariff relief in the United States. Each of these advances gives producers a little more breathing room and gives the country a little more resilience against global shocks.

Beyond the subtropical industries, our broader trade and market-access agenda has also gained real traction. Since taking office, I have led progress on eleven major market and tariff fronts. Along with the DTIC, we have kept South Africa's World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute against the EU's restrictive citrus measures on the agenda, thereby defending our farmers against protectionism disguised as science.

I am also involved in ongoing negotiations with the US to advance South Africa's long-term efforts to secure broader access for South African citrus across all growing regions. These discussions form part of a structured bilateral work programme aimed at resolving historic trade restrictions linked to Citrus Black Spot (CBS). My goal is to ensure that citrus farmers from all provinces, not only those within CBS-free zones, can participate in the lucrative US market. Hopefully, I will soon be able to report on some positive developments in this regard.

We secured market access for South African table grapes to the Philippines, reopened the fresh-apple market in Thailand after many years, and expanded exports across Southeast Asia, including Vietnam and broader Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) destinations. In October this year, I signed a landmark protocol with China, opening that market to five categories of stone fruit. This deal will consolidate our positive momentum on broader fruit trade cooperation, and considering China's huge demand for off-season litchis, there is now more impetus than ever to finalise detailed pest lists and cold-treatment verification.

**Biosecurity and Border Control**

Our markets abroad depend entirely on how strong and credible our biosecurity systems are at home. Every pest interception, every missed inspection, or every delay in outbreak control can close a border overnight and erode years of hard-won trust.

We have therefore strengthened coordination with the Border Management Authority to ensure that all imported plant material meets South Africa's phytosanitary import

protocols. Electronic traceability at ports of entry is being upgraded, and our inspectors are now working with digital tools that allow instant verification of compliance and faster clearance times.

However, our real breakthrough has been the establishment and growth of the National Biosecurity Hub, hosted at the University of Pretoria's Innovation Africa Campus. This Hub represents a whole-of-society approach to biosecurity, bringing together Government, science and industry to close the gap between research and frontline response. It was created in partnership with the Department of Science and Innovation, and it now anchors South Africa's modern, integrated biosecurity system.

The Hub strengthens surveillance, data sharing and rapid risk assessment regarding both plant and animal health. It maintains digital collections of pests and pathogens, coordinates real-time diagnostics, and manages a centralised Biosecurity Information Platform that gives decision makers the evidence they need to act early and act decisively.

Just as importantly, it supports the Agricultural and Agro-processing Master Plan (AAMP), linking pest and disease management with export competitiveness and rural industrialisation. Through its graduate internship programme, the Hub is also bringing new scientific talent into the system, namely, young veterinarians, plant pathologists and entomologists who are building careers in service of our national resilience.

This is how we move from a reactive model to a preventive one. The Biosecurity Hub, in collaboration with the Agricultural Research Council and the University of Pretoria, is building the science, skills and systems to keep South Africa's agriculture open, credible and competitive in a world where biosecurity is the new currency of trade.

**Optimising Market Access Through Plant Health**

Market access is built on technical credibility. That's why we're strengthening our Directorate: Plant Health – not with slogans, but with people. Because capacity is built from the bottom up, we have introduced an entry-level technical stream for young scientists, allowing them to build careers within Government, from the start rather than the middle, and through our partnership with the Biosecurity Hub, new graduates in

plant pathology and entomology are trained each year and seconded into the directorate to support pest-risk analysis and surveillance.

We're also running more than 45 research projects with the ARC, feeding data directly into our pest-status reports which is the evidence that underpins every phytosanitary certificate we issue. The world will only buy from us if it trusts our science and our systems.

**The ARC and the Nelspruit Campus**

The Agricultural Research Council's Tropical and Subtropical Crops Campus in Nelspruit continues to be the scientific engine of this industry.

Over the past three years, it has released four new mango varieties, five passionfruit varieties and two citrus varieties, all designed with market-specific traits: from lower sugar content and targeted fruit sizes to processing suitability, while research into heat-tolerant mango cultivars and longer shelf-life hybrids suitable for export continues.

This campus is also launching two strategic programmes: one for the large-scale multiplication of propagation material to supply small-scale growers, and another for a Postharvest and Agro-processing Hub that will drive innovation, reduce losses and add value locally. These initiatives are part of our commitment under the Agricultural and Agro-processing Master Plan.

As the campus approaches its centenary next year, we celebrate not just its research output, but its enduring partnership with growers, proof that South African science and farming advance best when they advance together.

**Act 36 and the Registration of Agricultural Remedies**

No farmer can meet export standards without access to safe and effective agricultural remedies. That is why we have been modernising the Registrar's Office under the Fertilisers, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act (Act No. 36 of 1947), not only by tackling backlogs, filling crucial scientific vacancies, and improving turnaround times, but also by digitising the entire application process.

In October 2025, we launched the Online Application System for Agricultural Inputs Control, a landmark reform that finally brings transparency and efficiency to how fertilisers, farm feeds and pesticides are regulated in South Africa. Each year thousands of inputs, from insecticides and herbicides to nematicides and rodenticides, are assessed and registered under Act 36, ensuring that what is manufactured, imported and sold in our country is safe and compliant. Until now, applicants had to travel to Pretoria and submit stacks of paperwork by hand. With this new digital platform, companies can submit and track their applications online in real time, receive instant feedback when information is missing, and benefit from a “fast lane” if their submissions meet all requirements from the outset.

This system removes unnecessary intermediaries, shortens approval times, and builds confidence between the department and the agricultural-inputs industry. The rollout will begin with pesticides and will expand to other regulated products over time.

A strong, digitised Registrar’s Office underpins competitiveness just as surely as sound trade policy does because regulatory efficiency is what allows our farmers to access the latest, safest and most effective tools needed to meet global export standards.

**Conclusion**

Friends, the story of our subtropical industries is one of steady growth, scientific excellence and extraordinary resilience. But global competition is tightening, and we must respond with the same energy and innovation that built this sector in the first place.

Our future competitiveness rests on three foundations: expanding and defending our markets, safeguarding our biosecurity, and investing in science and skills.

If we do these things together, there is no reason why South Africa’s avocados, mangoes and litchis should not dominate premium shelves, from Tokyo to Toronto, and from Dubai to Denmark.

Thank you for allowing me to share this message with you today, and I wish you every success for a productive and forward-looking symposium.

**END**