

SABIO BEECON 2026

Theme: Pollinators for Food Security, Economic Growth and Rural Transformation

Programme Director,

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Representatives of the Agricultural Research Council, universities and research institutions,

Leaders of organised agriculture,

Commercial and emerging beekeepers,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you at BEECON 2026.

One of the privileges of serving as Minister of Agriculture is that I have the opportunity to spend time with almost every part of our agricultural economy. Over the past two years I have met grain producers in the Free State, citrus growers in Limpopo, wine producers in the Western Cape, livestock farmers in KwaZulu-Natal, macadamia producers in Mpumalanga, avocado growers in Tzaneen and berry producers in a number of provinces. Although every commodity has its own opportunities and challenges, I have been struck by how similar many of those conversations have become.

Farmers want to know how they remain competitive in increasingly demanding international markets. They want to know how they improve productivity while input costs continue to rise. They want greater certainty around biosecurity, better logistics, stronger export opportunities and the confidence to continue investing in their businesses despite a world that has become more uncertain and more volatile.

Those conversations are usually about water, roads, ports, rail, financing, technology or market access. Increasingly, however, I believe they should also be about pollination, because pollination has become one of the productive assets that quietly determines whether many of South Africa's highest-value agricultural industries succeed.

It is against that backdrop that the theme of this year's conference becomes particularly relevant. "Pollinators for Food Security, Economic Growth and Rural Transformation" is not simply a conference title. It reflects the growing recognition that pollination is no longer a niche environmental issue, but a productive asset that supports the competitiveness of South African agriculture.

When we speak about pollinators, it is very easy for the conversation to focus exclusively on honey production or biodiversity. Both are critical. Honey supports livelihoods and creates opportunities for both large-scale and emerging producers, while healthy pollinator populations remain essential to functioning ecosystems. But if that is where the discussion ends, we miss the much bigger economic story.

The contribution that pollinators make to South African agriculture extends far beyond the hive.

They support the production systems that underpin many of our most successful export industries. Every season, managed colonies move into orchards and plantations across the country to pollinate crops that eventually find their way onto supermarket shelves in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and throughout Africa. Consumers buying South African citrus, apples, pears, macadamias, avocados or berries rarely think about pollination, yet it is one of the reasons those products meet the quality standards that allow our producers to compete in some of the most demanding markets in the world.

That is why I believe we should begin thinking about pollination differently.

Too often, we treat it as though it is a specialist service sitting alongside commercial agriculture. In reality, it forms part of the production system itself. Just as farmers invest in improved genetics, irrigation infrastructure and precision technologies to improve productivity, so too should we recognise pollination as an investment in agricultural performance. Healthy pollinator populations contribute to better fruit set,

improved uniformity, higher-quality produce and more consistent yields. Those benefits flow through the entire value chain, from the producer and the packhouse to exporters, processors and retailers.

This matters because South African agriculture is changing.

For much of our history, success was associated with producing more. More hectares under cultivation, larger herds and higher production volumes were seen as the principal measures of progress. Today, however, competitiveness increasingly depends on producing greater value from the resources already available to us which means improving quality, strengthening productivity and supplying markets that reward consistency rather than simply scale.

South Africa has become exceptionally good at doing exactly that.

We are not among the world's largest agricultural producers, yet we successfully compete against countries with significantly larger farming sectors. We have achieved this not because we enjoy lower production costs or unlimited natural resources, but because South African producers have built a reputation for innovation, adaptability and quality. They have learned how to produce more value from every hectare, every orchard and every production system.

That competitive advantage should never be taken for granted.

It depends on functioning logistics, reliable biosecurity systems, scientific innovation, investment and strong relationships between government and industry. Increasingly, I believe it also depends on recognising productive assets that have not always received the attention they deserve. Pollination is one of those assets.

When a fruit grower brings managed colonies into an orchard, the value created extends well beyond that specific farm. Better pollination contributes to higher-quality fruit, stronger pack-out rates and more reliable export consignments. Successful exports support jobs in packhouses, cold-chain facilities, logistics companies and ports. They generate foreign exchange, strengthen rural economies and reinforce South Africa's reputation as a reliable supplier of premium agricultural products. Few agricultural services create value across so many parts of the economy simultaneously.

Viewed from that perspective, the pollination economy is about much more than beekeeping.

It is about strengthening one of the foundations upon which South African agriculture continues to build its international competitiveness.

The latest honey trade figures provide an interesting illustration of both the opportunities before us and the challenges we still need to overcome.

During the first four months of this year, South Africa exported approximately R11.9 million worth of natural honey, an increase of around 35% compared with the same period last year. Botswana remains our largest export destination, while Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Namibia continue to provide valuable regional markets for South African producers. Those figures tell us that demand for South African honey is growing and that neighbouring countries continue to value the quality of our product.

At the same time, South Africa remains a substantial net importer of honey. In April alone, imports amounted to just over R18 million, compared with exports of approximately R3 million. China continues to dominate our import market because it produces honey at a scale and cost that South African producers cannot easily match.

For me, however, those figures are not primarily a trade story. They are a productivity story.

They tell us that domestic demand is strong. They tell us that regional demand is growing. More importantly, they remind us that increasing local production is not simply a matter of adding more hives. Expanding South Africa's honey industry depends on healthy bee populations, sufficient forage, effective disease management, commercial investment and productive landscapes that allow colonies to thrive. Market integrity is equally important.

South African consumers should be able to purchase honey with confidence that it is authentic, accurately labelled and compliant with applicable food standards. Equally, honest producers should be able to compete in a market where quality is recognised and where fraudulent or adulterated products do not undermine consumer confidence or erode the value of legitimate production.

Protecting market integrity is not inconsistent with open trade. South Africa's agricultural success has been built on participation in international markets, and we will continue to support a rules-based trading system that benefits both producers and consumers. Maintaining confidence in South African honey requires the consistent application of appropriate standards to all products offered for sale, irrespective of their origin. That is an important principle for domestic consumers and an equally important consideration as South African producers continue expanding into regional export markets.

Strengthening honey production depends on strengthening the pollination economy as a whole. This is an important distinction because it shifts the conversation away from short-term production targets towards the long-term resilience and competitiveness of the industry itself.

The response to that challenge cannot come from government alone, nor should it.

The future growth of this industry will come from an industry that increasingly sees itself not simply as a supplier of honey, but as an integral part of South Africa's modern agricultural economy.

Around the world, successful apiculture businesses are becoming increasingly diversified. Honey remains an important product, but commercial pollination, queen breeding, nucleus colony production, technical advisory services and value-added hive products are becoming equally important components of viable businesses. South Africa has many of the ingredients needed to develop along the same path because our horticultural industries continue to expand and increasingly depend on professional pollination services.

That creates opportunities not only for established commercial beekeepers, but also for new entrants to the sector.

One of the encouraging aspects of beekeeping is that it offers a practical entry point into agriculture for young people, women and rural entrepreneurs. With the right technical support, mentorship and access to markets, it provides opportunities to build sustainable enterprises that contribute both to household incomes and to the wider agricultural economy. As government, our objective should not simply be to increase participation. It should be to help create the conditions in which those enterprises can

grow into successful businesses that generate employment and invest back into their communities.

The same applies to research.

South African agriculture has consistently benefited from close collaboration between producers and scientists. Our competitiveness in industries such as fruit, wine and livestock has been built over decades through research that addressed practical production challenges rather than remaining confined to laboratories. The work being undertaken by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and our universities on honeybee health, disease surveillance and management practices follows exactly that tradition. Science has always been one of South African agriculture's greatest competitive advantages, and there is every reason why the beekeeping industry should continue drawing strength from that partnership.

As we think about the future, there is another point that deserves attention.

South Africa has quite rightly placed considerable emphasis on expanding agricultural exports and increasing value addition. Those ambitions are entirely achievable, but they begin much earlier than the factory or the export terminal. They begin in the field and in the orchard, where every improvement in productivity contributes to stronger commercial outcomes.

That is how value is created within agriculture. It is built incrementally, through hundreds of decisions and investments that together strengthen the competitiveness of an entire sector.

When we recognise pollination as productive agricultural infrastructure, we also begin making different decisions about research, investment and long-term planning. We stop seeing beekeeping as a specialist activity operating alongside agriculture and begin recognising it as one of the industries that helps agriculture perform at its highest level.

That, ultimately, is why conferences such as BEECON matter.

They bring together producers, researchers, industry organisations and government around a common objective: building a stronger agricultural sector. These conversations matter because they improve the way we think about agriculture and

remind us that some of the most important drivers of agricultural growth are not always the most visible.

South African agriculture has earned its reputation by adapting to changing conditions more quickly than many people thought possible, and I believe recognising the economic value of the pollination economy is part of that same process.

It is not simply about producing more honey.

It is about strengthening the productive systems that allow South African agriculture to compete with the very best in the world. That is an ambition worth pursuing, and it is one that I believe everyone gathered here today has a role in achieving.

Thank you.