

**MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE JOHN STEENHUISEN OPENING KEYNOTE
ADDRESS AT THE SOUTH AFRICA-ITALY AGRIBUSINESS FORUM AT THE
WESTIN HOTEL, CAPE TOWN**

09 JUNE 2026

His Excellency Francesco Lollobrigida, Minister of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry of the Italian Republic,

His Excellency Alberto Vecchi, Ambassador of Italy to South Africa,

Her Excellency Nosipho Jezile, Ambassador of South Africa to Italy,

Director-General Mooketsa Ramasodi,

Distinguished delegates from government, business, organised agriculture, research institutions and the financial sector,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Buongiorno e benvenuti a Città del Capo. È un grande piacere ospitarvi oggi in Sudafrica.

(Pronunciation: Bwon-JOR-no eh ben-veh-NOO-tee ah cheet-TAH del KAH-po. Eh oon GRAHN-deh pya-CHEH-reh os-pee-TAR-vee OD-jee een Soo-DAH-free-kah)

It is a privilege to host this inaugural South Africa-Italy Agribusiness Forum and to welcome our Italian partners to South Africa.

Today represents far more than the opening of a conference. It marks the beginning of what I believe can become one of the most dynamic agricultural partnerships between South Africa and a leading European agricultural nation.

Agriculture has always been about relationships. Relationships between farmers and markets. Relationships between innovation and productivity. Relationships between countries that recognise they can achieve more together than they can alone.

That spirit of partnership is what brings us together today.

South Africa and Italy are agricultural nations with different histories, different climates and different production systems. Yet we share many of the same ambitions.

We want to produce more food using fewer resources. We want to strengthen rural economies and create jobs. We want to build resilient food systems capable of withstanding climate shocks, disease outbreaks and market disruptions. And we want to ensure that the next generation sees agriculture not as an industry of the past, but as one of the most exciting sectors of the future.

The relationship between our two countries is already built on strong commercial foundations. Agricultural trade between South Africa and Italy now exceeds R650 million annually, with South Africa maintaining a positive agricultural trade balance and horticultural exports alone valued at approximately R190 million. These figures tell an important story. They demonstrate that Italian consumers and businesses already recognise the quality of South African agricultural products. But they also suggest that we are only scratching the surface of what is possible. The real opportunity lies not simply in exporting more fruit, nuts and other agricultural products, but in combining South Africa's production strengths with Italy's world-renowned expertise in processing, packaging, technology and branding to create greater value across the entire supply chain.

South Africa is also uniquely positioned as a gateway to the African continent. Through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), South Africa provides access to one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets. As food systems evolve and regional value chains deepen across Africa, the opportunities for strategic partnerships with South African businesses will only continue to expand.

Italian agriculture meanwhile has demonstrated how innovation, quality, regional identity and strong value chains can transform agricultural products into globally recognised brands that command premium value in international markets.

These strengths are not competing strengths. They are complementary strengths.

What excites me most about this partnership is that the opportunities before us are not abstract. They are highly practical and often region-to-region.

When we look closely at our respective agricultural landscapes, we find a remarkable alignment between South Africa's provincial strengths and Italy's regional expertise.

In the Western Cape, for example, we have world-class wine, deciduous fruit, citrus and fisheries industries. These sectors align naturally with regions such as Tuscany and Veneto, renowned for premium wine production and vineyard innovation, while Emilia-Romagna offers globally recognised expertise in food processing machinery and packaging automation. Sicily's expertise in citrus value addition and Liguria's experience in cold-chain logistics and port management present further opportunities for collaboration. Together, these strengths create opportunities that extend far beyond trade in raw products and towards joint ventures in premium food production, processing technologies, branding and export development.

In Limpopo, where avocados, citrus, mangoes and nuts are driving agricultural growth, there are clear opportunities to work with regions such as Sicily, Calabria and Campania, which have developed sophisticated industries around fruit processing and Mediterranean crop systems. Whether through avocado oil production, fruit pulp processing, citrus value addition or export partnerships, there is considerable scope to build integrated value chains that create more value on both sides.

In Mpumalanga, our growing citrus, macadamia and horticultural industries could benefit from Italian expertise in orchard technologies, precision agriculture, smart irrigation systems and advanced packaging solutions. These partnerships can help producers improve productivity, reduce waste and access higher-value markets.

In the Eastern Cape, our dairy, livestock and wool sectors align strongly with regions such as Sardinia, Lazio and Abruzzo. There are opportunities for collaboration in dairy processing, cheese production, livestock genetics, veterinary science and specialised meat processing. Such partnerships could help unlock new opportunities for both commercial and emerging producers.

The grain-producing provinces of the Free State and North West present equally exciting possibilities. Italian regions such as Emilia-Romagna, Umbria, Apulia and Campania have built globally competitive industries around grain milling, pasta manufacturing and food processing. There is a clear opportunity to explore partnerships that connect South African grain production with higher-value food manufacturing, processing and export opportunities.

KwaZulu-Natal's strengths in sugar, subtropical fruit and forestry similarly complement Italian expertise in food processing, fruit canning, citrus agro-processing and

renewable energy solutions. These are precisely the kinds of partnerships that can drive rural industrialisation and create jobs beyond the farm gate.

What emerges from this picture is not simply a trade relationship. It is the possibility of building integrated value chains that connect farms, processors, logistics providers, researchers, technology companies and retailers across both countries.

This is exactly the kind of economic partnership we should be striving for. One that combines South African production capacity, entrepreneurial talent and access to African markets with Italian expertise in technology, value addition, processing, branding and innovation.

When we speak about deepening agricultural value chains, this is what we mean. Not exporting opportunities, but creating them together.

This Forum is therefore about far more than increasing trade volumes. It is about creating the commercial relationships, investments and technology exchanges that will enable both our countries to move further up the value chain.

President Ramaphosa has set an ambitious objective of increasing value addition within South Africa's agricultural sector by 30%. As government, we are working hard to create the conditions necessary to turn that ambition into reality, and partnerships such as the one we are building with Italy will be critical to achieving it.

For too long, developing economies have exported raw products while importing finished products. The future lies not only in producing more, but in processing more. Not only in growing commodities, but in creating value. Not only in exporting what comes from the soil, but in building industries that capture more of the economic value generated throughout the production chain.

Italian expertise in value addition and agro-industrial development can play an important role in helping South Africa deepen agricultural value chains, create jobs and unlock new economic opportunities.

Equally important is the opportunity for collaboration on biosecurity and agricultural resilience.

Recent years have reminded us that agricultural growth depends on strong animal and plant health systems. Whether we are dealing with Foot and Mouth Disease, invasive

plant pests or emerging biosecurity threats, these challenges require cooperation, scientific engagement and trust between trading partners.

South Africa places enormous value on maintaining high sanitary and phytosanitary standards and on ensuring that trade is guided by science-based approaches. We believe there is significant scope for deeper cooperation between South Africa and Italy in areas such as plant health, animal health, research collaboration, risk management, traceability systems and regulatory cooperation.

I am particularly encouraged by the opportunities for closer collaboration between South Africa's Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and Italy's Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, CREA. Strong partnerships between our scientific institutions will be essential if we are to accelerate innovation, strengthen biosecurity systems and equip our farmers with the tools needed to remain competitive in a rapidly changing world.

Italy's expertise and leadership within Europe make it an important partner as we continue to strengthen agricultural cooperation between South Africa and the European Union. As we work through complex agricultural trade matters, it is invaluable to have partners who understand both the realities of production and the importance of maintaining open, science-based and rules-based agricultural trade. We see significant potential for Italy to play a constructive role in strengthening dialogue, understanding and practical cooperation between our agricultural sectors.

One of the most significant outcomes of this Forum will be the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between our two countries.

This MoU provides a framework for long-term cooperation across a wide range of areas, including research and innovation, digital agriculture, agricultural mechanisation, extension services, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, seed development, soil health, agro-processing and technology transfer.

Importantly, it establishes a Joint Working Group that will ensure that today's commitments translate into practical action. We do not intend for this document to gather dust on a shelf. We intend for it to become a living framework that drives collaboration, identifies opportunities and removes obstacles.

Today should therefore not be seen as a destination. It should be seen as a starting point.

My hope is that we will look back on this inaugural Forum as the foundation of a lasting legacy between South Africa and Italy. A legacy built not on a single event, but on years of collaboration between governments, researchers, farmers, agribusinesses and investors working together to unlock opportunity and create shared prosperity.

For that reason, I would like to see this Forum become a regular feature of our bilateral relationship.

The opportunities before us are simply too significant for this to be a once-off engagement.

We should use the momentum generated here to establish an ongoing platform for dialogue, collaboration and business engagement between our agricultural sectors. My ambition is that future South Africa-Italy Agribusiness Forums are held on a regular basis, alternating between our two countries, and reporting back on the investments, partnerships and commercial outcomes that emerged from the previous gathering.

The success of this Forum should ultimately not be measured by the speeches delivered from this stage. It should be measured by the deals concluded, the partnerships established, the investments unlocked and the jobs created in the months and years that follow.

I also hope that our Italian friends will enjoy the opportunity to visit some of our wine farms and experience first-hand why South African wines continue to earn recognition in markets around the world. While we may not settle the age-old debate about who produces the better wine, I am confident that the conversations begun in this Forum will continue over a glass in the vineyards. There is perhaps no better example of value addition in agriculture than a bottle of wine, where generations of expertise, innovation, craftsmanship and entrepreneurship come together in a product that tells the story of a place and its people.

That, ultimately, is what this Forum is about. It is about bringing together the people, ideas, technologies and investments that can help both our countries unlock greater value from agriculture, create jobs, strengthen food security and build more resilient rural economies.

The future of agriculture will belong to those who embrace innovation, deepen cooperation and create value across entire supply chains. South Africa and Italy have an opportunity to do exactly that.

Let us ensure that the momentum created here over the next two days translates into lasting outcomes for our farmers, our businesses and our rural communities.

Let us seize that opportunity together.

I thank you.

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