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SPEECH BY AGRICULTURE MINISTER JOHN STEENHUISEN AT THE AFSTA CONGRESS 2026, 23 MARCH 2026, CENTURY CITY CONFERENCE CENTRE, CAPE TOWN

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

AFSTA Congress 2026

Theme: “Empowering Africa’s Future, One Seed at a Time”

Programme Director,

Distinguished Ministers,

Leaders of the African Seed Trade Association,

Representatives of industry, research institutions and farmers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you at this important gathering of the African seed industry. South Africa is honoured to host this engagement; particularly given the historical role our own seed sector has played in the establishment and growth of the African Seed Trade Association (AFSTA). SANSOR, the South African National Seed Organization, represents the backbone of our domestic seed industry, and its first General Manager, Dr Wynand van der Walt, was a founding member of AFSTA back in 2000. His vision and dedication to advancing the seed industry in Africa forms part of the legacy of our leaders who understood, even then, that Africa’s agricultural future would depend on collaboration, innovation and shared progress. This congress represents far more than a meeting of stakeholders. It is a platform where the future of African agriculture is actively shaped, and where the partnerships that will determine the trajectory of our food systems are forged. Agriculture remains central to South Africa’s economy and to the livelihoods of millions of our people. It is a sector that sustains rural communities, anchors value chains, and contributes significantly to trade and economic growth. Today, the sector employs close to 950 000 South Africans. It is also one of the few sectors that consistently earns foreign

revenue for the country. Last year alone, South Africa exported agricultural products worth more than US\$15 billion, generating a trade surplus of over US\$7 billion. Across the continent, agriculture is not only about food production; it is about stability, opportunity and long-term development.

At the heart of this system lies something fundamental, yet often overlooked: seed. Seed is not simply an input. It is the starting point of productivity, the carrier of innovation, and the foundation upon which resilient food systems are built. Every grain we speak of in agriculture, whether in yield, climate resilience, nutritional value or water efficiency, begins with advances in seed.

In South Africa, the strength of our seed sector reflects this reality. This industry was valued at over R13,1 billion in 2024, with field crops accounting for approximately R8,6 billion, vegetable and ornamental crops at R3,5 billion, and forage and turf crops just under R1 billion. Within this, hybrid maize alone represents a value of over R6,4 billion, underscoring the scale and importance of seed innovation in driving our grain sector. These are not abstract numbers. They reflect an advanced, competitive and innovation-driven industry that continues to evolve in response to farmer needs and market demands.

One of the key reasons for this success has been a regulatory environment that supports innovation while ensuring quality and integrity. South Africa's framework, underpinned by legislation such as the Plant Breeders' Rights Act, 2018 (Act No. 12 of 2018) and the Plant Improvement Act, 2018 (Act No. 11 of 2018), has created a system that incentivises investment in plant breeding while protecting farmers and consumers through rigorous standards. This balance between innovation and regulation is crucial. Without protection of intellectual property, there is little incentive to invest. Without quality control, there is little trust in the system.

We are also seeing how advances in science are opening new frontiers. New breeding techniques, including gene editing and genomic selection, are creating opportunities to improve yield stability, enhance climate resilience, and reduce vulnerability to pests and diseases. These technologies are not theoretical; they are already demonstrating their value in improving agricultural outcomes under increasingly variable climatic conditions. It is therefore crucial that our regulatory framework keeps pace with scientific innovation and supports competitiveness and the long-term sustainability of our agricultural sector.

The Executive Council, established under the Genetically Modified Organisms Act (GMO Act), 1997 (Act No. 15 of 1997), has already begun updating the risk-assessment framework which guides Government's evaluation on whether a new genetically modified or gene-edited crop is safe before it can be used commercially by introducing a tiered system that aligns regulatory requirements with the level of risk involved. Discussions last year also explored ways to simplify the process for certain low-risk applications without

compromising safeguards. The outcomes of those discussions will be considered by the Executive Council this month as we determine the way forward.

Importantly, South Africa is not alone in this journey. A number of African countries, including Kenya, Malawi and Nigeria are engaging constructively with the evolving science around new breeding techniques, including gene editing. In these contexts, regulatory approaches are being developed to recognise that different technologies may present varying levels of risk, and that this should be reflected in proportionate oversight mechanisms. Where gene-edited crops do not involve the introduction of foreign DNA, there is ongoing consideration of how these products can be assessed in a way that maintains appropriate safeguards while ensuring that innovation is not unnecessarily delayed and that farmers are able to benefit from improved crop varieties as quickly as possible.

These developments reflect a broader continental conversation on how best to align regulatory systems with scientific progress and reflect a growing recognition that Africa cannot afford to lag behind in adopting the tools that will determine future competitiveness and food security. As an example, India has approved its first genome-edited rice varieties. By enabling the development of improved rice varieties without the introduction of foreign DNA, India has reduced the time required to bring improved varieties to market and lowering development costs. In a country like India, where millions of smallholder farmers depend on consistent yields, that makes a real difference. It helps farmers manage drought, heat and changing pest pressures more effectively, while also improving productivity and reducing risk. Over time, this kind of progress strengthens the entire agricultural system, making it more dependable, more competitive and better able to respond to both domestic demand and global market opportunities.

At the same time, we must remain clear that innovation alone is not enough. The benefits of improved seed must be accessible to all farmers, not only those operating at large scale. The expansion of access to quality seed, coupled with extension support, market access and financing, is essential if we are to build a truly inclusive agricultural sector. This is particularly important for smallholder and emerging farmers, who remain central to Africa's agricultural landscape.

This is where partnerships become crucial. The seed sector does not operate in isolation. It is part of a broader ecosystem that includes governments, research institutions, private companies and farmers themselves. Collaboration among these actors is what enables innovation to move from the laboratory into the field, and from the field into the market.

We must also recognise the broader challenges that continue to shape our agricultural systems. Climate variability, biosecurity risks and shifting global trade dynamics are placing increasing pressure on production systems. As we have seen in recent years, extreme

weather events can disrupt entire growing seasons, while disease outbreaks can undermine both production and market access. In this context, the role of resilient seed systems becomes even more important, providing farmers with the tools to adapt and sustain production under changing conditions.

At a continental level, there is also a significant opportunity to strengthen regional integration. By aligning regulatory systems, improving seed certification processes, and facilitating trade, African countries can unlock greater efficiencies and expand access to improved varieties across borders. This will be essential if we are to build a more integrated and competitive agricultural sector.

The theme of this congress speaks to a simple but powerful truth: empowering Africa's future begins with something as small, yet as significant, as a seed. The question before us is whether we are prepared to act with the urgency and ambition that this moment demands.

The choices we make now will determine whether Africa remains dependent on imported solutions, or whether we build a continent that is able to feed itself, compete globally, and lead in agricultural innovation. The current conflict in the Middle East is a stark reminder of how quickly global supply chains can be disrupted, and how exposed we remain to external shocks in areas such as fertiliser, fuel and key agricultural inputs. It underscores the urgency of building stronger, more self-reliant production systems on the continent.

We cannot afford a future where innovation is slowed by uncertainty, where farmers are constrained by lack of access to quality inputs, or where fragmented systems hold back the full potential of this sector. The stakes are too high. Food security, economic growth, rural livelihoods and social stability are all tied to the strength of our agricultural systems, and those systems begin with seed.

What is required now is not incremental progress, but alignment. Alignment between policy and science, between public and private investment and across borders, so that Africa can operate not as isolated markets, but as a connected and competitive agricultural region.

South Africa stands ready to play its part in that effort. We are committed to building an enabling environment that supports innovation, protects quality and expands opportunity. The future of African agriculture will be determined by the strength of our partnerships and the clarity of our shared vision.

So, let this congress be more than a gathering: Let it be a point of convergence where commitments are made, where collaboration is strengthened, and where practical steps are agreed upon to move the sector forward.

Because if we get this right, we will not only empower farmers. We will unlock growth, strengthen resilience, and ensure that Africa takes its rightful place as a global agricultural force.

And that journey begins, quite simply, with the seed.

Thank you.

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