

The Farmers' Chronicles

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Minister Steenhuisen's Message of Hope for the New Year (2026)

Every year, as the new year starts, the hardworking farmers of South Africa do what they have been doing for centuries. They watch the sky, check their animals, till the soil, and make decisions based on the unknown and the risks involved. In this context, the New Year message by the Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, takes on a sense of urgency.

Steenhuisen spoke to the agricultural sector, which is perhaps more familiar than any other sector with the challenges of pressure and endurance. He reminded us that agriculture is not just an economic activity.

Agriculture is a lifestyle that allows families to survive, feed the population of South Africa, and hold rural communities together. The message acknowledges that each meal in South Africa is the result of the shared effort of all stakeholders including farmworkers, veterinarians, researchers, agricultural advisers, agri-businesses and rural households.

Steenhuisen did not ignore the heavy burden placed on the sector by climate uncertainty, rising input costs, animal disease and global instability. All these factors influence every single decision made by farmers in all commodity groups.



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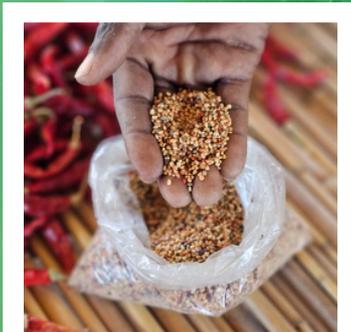


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However, the message is not one of despair. Rather, it identifies the opportunities presented by the New Year. There is a renewed commitment to grow production, improve rural safety, increase exports, and build an agricultural sector that is inclusive, resilient and competitive. For many farmers, this message indicates that there is an acknowledgment of the need for both practical assistance and long-term security for the future of their farming businesses. South Africa's agriculture has earned a world-class reputation for quality, traceability and reliability. Trust earned in the global market gives South Africa access to markets and creates jobs along the value chain, from farm gate to port.

The minister's message emphasises the importance of preserving and expanding South Africa's access to international markets. In 2026, significant steps will be taken to open new markets, protect existing markets, and comply with international standards. To achieve this, farmers will continue to concentrate on producing high-quality products to ensure that their sales today will create opportunities for the future of the sector. The future of agriculture is dependent upon young people. Therefore, the minister's message clearly states that supporting young farmers is not optional, it is compulsory.

Training for young farmers, providing them with land, funding, mentorship and technology will be prioritised. Young farmers bring enthusiasm, innovative ideas and new ways of thinking to the table regardless of whether it is through modern production systems, smart usage of technology or new ways of ensuring sustainability. Success for young farmers is not only about creating opportunities for themselves, but also about continuing to sustain rural communities and keep them alive and productive for generations to come. While Government has a role to play, the message is clear that agriculture will not advance through policy alone.

Biosecurity, animal and plant health, infrastructure development and rural safety will be advanced through collaboration among the entire value chain. Trust, shared responsibility and partnership are recurrent themes in the minister's message. The challenges facing agriculture are collective and therefore the solutions to those challenges are also collective. Only when farmers, industry, researchers, Government and communities work together with a common goal can progress be achieved. One of the most powerful and practical commitments in the message was the government's stance against Foot and mouth disease (FMD). FMD is not an abstract concept for livestock farmers.



FMD threatens the livelihoods of farmers, the market access of livestock farmers and the confidence of the entire value chain. To restore South Africa's FMD-free status, the government has committed to using vaccination. This is an important step for an industry valued at approximately R80 billion. The plan to eliminate FMD is clear and has a timeline. The objective is to reduce FMD incidents by 70% in high-risk areas within 24 months. Mass vaccination will form the cornerstone of this strategy.

The target is to vaccinate 90% of communal and commercial herds, with 100% of dairy cow herds. Vaccinations of high-risk herds will commence in February 2026, provided that a consistent flow of vaccines from the Botswana Vaccine Institute is maintained. Capacity is also being enhanced. The Agricultural Research Council (ARC) is enhancing local vaccine production. Additionally, the Onderstepoort Veterinary Laboratory is increasing the number of diagnostic personnel to accelerate testing and response times. Another priority area is traceability. The Livestock Identification and Traceability System will enable animal movement to be tracked through geolocating, thereby assisting in protecting biosecurity zones and restoring confidence in disease management measures.

Finally, enforcement will also be strengthened through cooperation with the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other law enforcement agencies. Unemployed veterinary graduates will be deployed to assist with vaccination and monitoring activities in the field. While Government is addressing this through provision of vaccines and funding (including redirecting part of the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programmes (CASP) funds to biosecurity), success will ultimately depend upon total cooperation of producers and other stakeholders within the industry.

Speed, discipline and collective commitment will therefore be crucial to the achievement of success. Minister John Steenhuisen's New Year Message is fundamentally a reflection of appreciation and a call to action. It is an acknowledgement of the hardiness and resolve of those producing food under difficult circumstances, and it identifies and recognises the quiet fortitude which maintains the momentum of the sector. As the new production cycle commences, this New Year Message provides a consistent reminder that the future of South Africa's agriculture will be defined not merely by the plans and policies, but by the mutual respect, cooperation and the day-to-day decisions made on each farm throughout South Africa.



Minister Steenhuisen's Message of Hope for the New Year (2026)

Minister John Steenhuisen wishes to extend his appreciation to the agricultural community for their devotion and perseverance and to express a hope held by so many people in the sector: for good weather, productive growing seasons, safe rural communities, expanding markets and increased confidence in the coming year.
