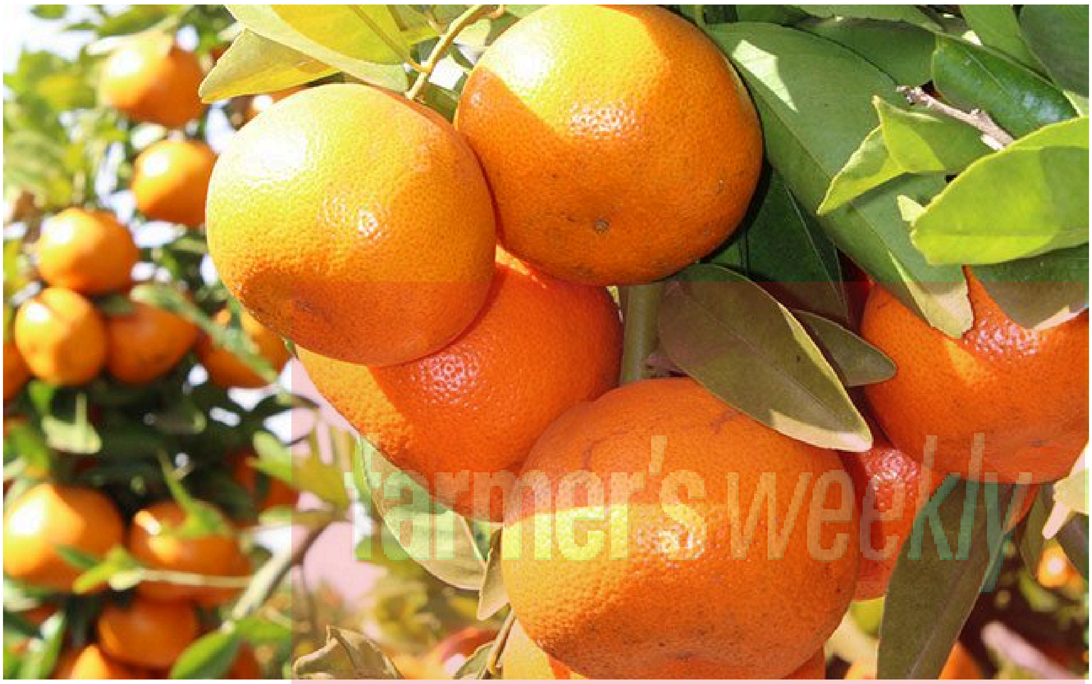
SA must negotiate better trade deals – Steenhuisen

By Glenneis Kriel | 25 September 2024 | 10:25 am

Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen, emphasised the importance of pragmatism and negotiations to unlock the potential of new and existing markets in an interview with Farmer's Weekly at Nampo Cape, Bredasdorp, in the Western Cape.



Steenhuisen said that South Africa had to look for ways to expand on existing agreements.

"SADC is the only region with a bilateral agreement with the EU. Despite this, the EU is sourcing their beef from Botswana and Namibia because of biosecurity issues in South Africa. By getting on top of biosecurity, we can deepen and widen our footprint in the EU."

The same applied to the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). He explained that while South Africa is currently able to export citrus from the Western Cape and Northern Cape to the US, the country should be able to export citrus from all regions if it can demonstrate phytosanitary compliance.

Secondly, government should look for new markets, such as Japan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Thailand and South Korea, and actively market South Africa's excellent products in these countries.

He said that the recent signing of the Co-operation in Prevention and Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease Protocol with China would strengthen agricultural trade with the country, as it compartmentalised South Africa, allowing it to continue livestock and meat exports from unaffected provinces should a foot and mouth disease outbreak occur.

In the past exports from the whole country were banned during an outbreak.

The Greasy Wool Protocol, in turn, allowed the wool industry to export greasy wool, provided it followed a certain protocol, should a foot and mouth disease outbreak occur, whereas the Quarantine and Sanitary Requirements for Dairy Products Exported Protocol would allow South Africa to export yoghurts, cheese, powder milk and other dairy products to China.

"We will be competing with the Chinese and Australian producers but having tasted dairy products available in China, I am confident that we will be able to hold our own in the Chinese market," Steenhuisen said.

A current frustration for the minister is that South Africa was unable to leverage its BRICS relationship to negotiate trade agreements with those countries. Instead, it had to approach BRICS through the *Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions* (SACAU).

"The whole goal of BRICS should be to strengthen trade between these countries. We need to do a cost benefit analysis to see if SACAU still presented South Africa's best interest."

The same applied to exports to African countries. "With Namibia and Botswana banning exports of certain vegetables from South Africa, we need to analyse whether the Southern African Development Community or the African Continental Agreement did not present better negotiation opportunities than SACAU."

Steenhuisen is not afraid that stronger trade relationships with China would impact relationships with the United States negatively. "We should maximise opportunities beyond ideology and old allegiances. Like India, we should put South Africa's interest first when negotiating trade agreements."

Glenneis Kriel

Glenneis Kriel is a senior agricultural journalist for Farmer's Weekly. Her ventures into agricultural journalism started out by chance, more than 20 years ago, when someone suggested she freelance for the magazine, which turned out to be her dream job. Her passion is to write stories that inspire greatness and make people evaluate the way they are doing things.