

February 16, 2026

On plant health and embracing new plant-breeding techniques

- The major challenge currently confronting South Africa's agriculture is the spread of foot-and-mouth disease. For many farmers across the country, the most urgent tasks are both securing sufficient vaccines and rolling them out quickly in the coming months, particularly as the beef and dairy industries continue to suffer big losses. There is also pressure on sheep, goats, and other livestock to prevent the disease from spreading.
- As efforts to get the country through this monumental challenge continue, we believe it is important to sharpen our focus on the broader task at hand: strengthening biosecurity. This covers both animal and plant health. In recent years, we haven't focused much on plant health, except a few times, such as when we had a goss's wilt scare in the maize industry, a few cases of citrus black spot, or cases of sclerotinia in sunflower seeds.
- But the fact that South Africa managed to control the outbreaks of these particular diseases when they occurred a few years ago was due to organized agricultural and government scientific capabilities, and, most importantly, the availability of crop protection or agrochemicals necessary to address some of them. Therefore, as the animal health division in the Department of Agriculture focuses on the pressing challenge of the day, the foot-and-mouth disease, there is an opportunity for the plant health division to assess if they have all the requirements to tackle any outbreak that may occur on fruits, vegetables or crops in future.
- The challenge with crop diseases is that they can spread quickly and cause much more rapid damage in the field than we typically see with livestock. Therefore, speed is everything in ensuring the appropriate controls are available. We raise this as an important area, particularly given the drastic climate variation we observe across the country. The production conditions in some areas have changed noticeably over time, which may introduce new risks.
- The other essential part is ensuring that South Africa has access to the best crop protection technology available in the market. Many technology developers worldwide have operations in South Africa. Therefore, the Department of Agriculture, along with the Agricultural Research Council, must continuously interact with technology developers to assess the various crop protection technologies they are releasing globally and determine their suitability and need in South Africa. This will require a proactive approach from the government, unlike the current approach, in which technology developers typically approach regulators with new technologies. The government, recognising the food security risks, must take a proactive approach to ensure that South African farmers have access to the latest crop protection technologies, thereby safeguarding the country's food security.
- Beyond crop protection, we must never forget that South Africa's agriculture is key to ensuring that the country is the most food-secure country at the national level in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa is also the only African country in the top-40 global agricultural exporters, having more than doubled since

1994 on the back of the adoption of high-yielding seed cultivars. South Africa has been the only African country to adopt a bold approach to embracing science and adopting genetically engineered seeds for grains and oilseeds in the early 2000s. Since then, we have seen crop yields improve noticeably, contributing to the gains we mentioned above. But ensuring that South Africa improves further is not a given.

- The key lies in South African regulators' attitudes towards new technologies. We have to maintain a progressive approach and not give in to the politics of non-food and non-scientific voices that shout on the sidelines. Food security is national security, and the government must ensure we progress, leaning on science. Therefore, the registration of high-yielding new genomic techniques is required. South Africa cannot afford to fall behind the EU, the USA, South America, and many of its competitors in global agriculture. The Department of Agriculture's crop science division must adopt a progress-and-science-embracing approach for the good of the country.

WEEKLY HIGHLIGHT

What message did the SONA deliver to the SA agricultural community?

- The South African farming sector is resilient. We have faced numerous challenges in the past, and the sector has powered through, with high farming costs for family businesses and agribusinesses most times, but has powered through nonetheless.
- We pride ourselves on being a sector that is in the top-40 global agricultural exporters, the only African country on that list, ensuring that South Africa is the most food-secure country in sub-Saharan Africa, at least at a national level, and the sector has more than doubled since 1994.
- The agricultural sector and its value chain employ over a million people and generate numerous positive spillovers to agricultural towns and interlinked businesses. But for this momentum to be sustained, we need to address the basics, which pose significant challenges for the sector. Rural crime, inept municipal service delivery, crumbling water infrastructure, the need for additional export markets, and animal diseases are among the key pressing challenges facing the sector.
- Thankfully, some of these were highlighted in the State of the Nation Address (SONA). These mentions are important because they provide a key roadmap for the government's programme of work and priorities. For example, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated, amongst other things, that: "We have made progress in improving the performance of our ports and freight rail lines, steadily increasing the volume of goods that we move in and out of our country. We have restored our passenger rail system. More and more commuters are now able to travel to work on new, locally made trains, significantly reducing their transport costs. We are investing across our country in roads, bridges, rail lines, ports, dams, wind and solar farms."
- These logistics improvements are key to sustaining the agricultural sector. We cannot talk of boosting exports without a clearer focus on port efficiency and on improving road and railway conditions.
- The organized business, organized agriculture, and various stakeholders have been part of collaborative efforts with Transnet to improve the ports. There remains much work to be done on roads. Many agricultural towns have crumbling roads that impose high costs on agribusinesses and local farming. The

municipalities and provincial governments will need to heed the President's message and follow through on the road infrastructure aspect; it remains key to supporting agricultural and many other manufacturing businesses.

- The President also stated that: "To ensure water security in the long term, we are building new dams and upgrading existing infrastructure. We have committed more than R156 billion in public funding for water and sanitation infrastructure alone over the next three years. Construction of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project and other large-scale projects, such as the Ntabelanga Dam, part of the Mzimvubu Water Project in the Eastern Cape, is advancing. And we are in the final stages of establishing a National Water Resource Infrastructure Agency to effectively manage the country's water infrastructure and to mobilize funding for water infrastructure."
- This remains key, and continuous momentum on it is vital, not only for the agricultural sector, but also for many sectors of our economy and communities. Another key point that emerged was the recognition of trade's importance in boosting South Africa's agricultural growth. The President highlighted that: "Our trade policy is aimed at promoting sustainable development, growth and strengthening our international partnerships. In a world where countries are looking to diversify their supply chains, we have an opportunity to ramp up our exports across the globe."
- No one in South Africa's agriculture can argue with this particular point. We now export roughly half of our production. As we plan for new production over the next couple of years, the need to open additional export markets becomes even more pressing. We need to build on the recent visits to Asia and the Middle East and ensure they yield trade agreements soon.
- When considering trade, the earlier point about logistics is key. The focus for both policymakers and agribusinesses and organized agriculture should be on improving logistical efficiency. This entails investments in port and rail infrastructure, as well as in road improvements in farming towns.
- In addition, South Africa must work diligently to maintain its existing markets in the EU, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. The South African Department of Trade, Industry and Competition, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, and the Department of Agriculture should lead the way in expanding exports to current markets and exploring new ones.
- South Africa should expand market access to key BRICS countries, including China, India, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. There is also a need to increase focus on the broader Asia and Middle East regions to secure lower tariffs and the removal of phytosanitary barriers.
- We are working to expand the sector and ensure we provide high-quality products to new markets. It remains key that the sector's "knowledge infrastructure" is up to date and, importantly, that new entrant farmers are supported. For this reason, we found the President's call for more extension officers valuable.
- The President stated that: "We will deploy 10,000 new extension officers to support farmers and improve agricultural productivity. This will give rise to many opportunities for young people to be employed in the agricultural sector."
- The logistics, processes, and timelines for this remain unclear and may take some time. Still, the point is valuable, and it remains for the Department of Agriculture to distil and offer more information and the plan ahead.

- Indeed, no agricultural message today can be credible without acknowledging and outlining a clear plan to address the sector's most pressing challenge: foot-and-mouth disease. In this, the President said: "While the rest of our agriculture sector is thriving, the cattle industry is today facing one of the worst outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease our country has experienced. This disease is damaging our economy, resulting in export bans, trade restrictions and devastation of herds. We have decided to vaccinate the national herd of 14 million cattle. This requires 28 million doses of vaccine over the next 12 months. The state will facilitate the acquisition of the vaccines centrally to ensure that we get the right vaccine for the particular strain of the virus in South Africa."
- The President added that: "We will work closely with the private sector to enable an efficient rollout, and most importantly, we will ensure that commercial, private and communal farmers have immediate access to vaccines.We have classified foot-and-mouth disease as a national disaster and will be mobilizing all necessary capabilities within the state to deal with this crisis."
- This is the guidance many in the sector needed, and it was stated clearly that over the next couple of months, we will start receiving significant volumes of vaccines. Foot-and-mouth disease will remain with us for some time, but the key is that there are emerging plans to ramp up domestic vaccine production and, most importantly, to secure imports for the near- and medium-term. The private sector will play a key role in the distribution.
- The state will play a central role in import controls to ensure the country receives the appropriate vaccines and minimizes the risk of introducing new strains. The key now is to secure large volumes of these vaccines soon, and the Department of Agriculture is making inroads; they should report to the nation in a month or two.
- Admittedly, as these processes unfold, there are immense costs to the dairy and beef industries. Therefore, urgency in any work is key. Conversations with the financial industry about the sector's risks and a collaborative approach are important.
- Ultimately, the SONA touched on key aspects of the agricultural sector. Many other important issues were not directly addressed, including the state's slow progress on land reform. But this doesn't suggest that these are less important. The focus was just on the pressing issues of the day. Still, work to release government-owned land must begin, as it remains key to the sector's inclusiveness agenda.

What are we watching this week?

- This is a quiet week on the global front. We only have one major data release. On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will release the **U.S. Fruit and Tree Nuts data**.
- On the domestic front, on Tuesday, Statistics South Africa will release the **Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) data** for the fourth quarter of 2025. Moreover, Statistics South Africa will release the **Consumer Price Index (CPI) data** for January 2026 on Wednesday.
- Also on Wednesday, the South African Grain Information Services (SAGIS) will publish its **weekly data on South Africa's Grain and Oilseed Producer Deliveries**. In the previous release on February 6, 2026, South African farmers delivered 85,746 tonnes of maize to commercial silos. This was the 41st weekly delivery for the 2025-26 marketing year (which corresponds with the 2024-25 production season), bringing the overall maize deliveries so far to 15.19 million tonnes. South Africa's 2024-25 maize

harvest is forecast at 16.65 million tonnes, a 28% year-on-year increase, primarily due to expected annual yield improvements.

- The 2025-26 oilseeds marketing year began at the start of March 2025. In the first 49th weeks, soybean producer deliveries totalled 2.74 million tonnes, accounting for 98% of the harvest of 2.80 million tonnes. In the case of sunflower seeds, the first 48 weeks of the new 2025-26 marketing year's producer deliveries totalled 697,578 tonnes, out of the harvest of 700,000 tonnes.
- South Africa's 2025-26 winter wheat harvest has ended, and farmers continue to deliver the crop to commercial silos. In the first 19 weeks of this 2025-26 marketing year, farmers have delivered about 1.68 million tonnes of wheat to commercial silos. This is 87% of the expected harvest of 1.93 million tonnes for the season.
- On Thursday, SAGIS will publish its weekly **South Africa's Grains and Oilseeds Trade data**. In the week of February 6, South Africa exported 38,448 tonnes of maize, with approximately 45% going to Zimbabwe, 18% to Botswana, and the remainder to other countries in the Southern African region. This placed South Africa's 2025-26 maize exports at 1.5 million tonnes, out of the expected seasonal exports of 2.4 million tonnes. The current marketing year only ends in April 2026. We expect more robust export activity this quarter, driven by stronger demand in the Southern Africa region.
- While South Africa has an ample harvest and will remain a net exporter of maize, minor imports of yellow maize from Argentina are expected to continue for South Africa's coastal regions. For example, so far in the 2025-26 marketing year, South Africa has imported 110,448 tonnes of yellow maize for feed in the country's coastal regions. These importers mainly take advantage of the affordable prices of Argentinian supplies.
- South Africa is a net wheat importer, and February 6 marked the 19th week of the new 2025-26 marketing year. The cumulative imports to date have totalled 519,117 tonnes from the United States, Latvia, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Romania, Lithuania, Russia and Poland. We expect South Africa's 2025-26 wheat imports to reach 1.75 million tonnes, down from 1.83 million tonnes in the 2024-25 marketing year.