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Agbiz Media Day Shines Spotlight on Fruit Sector and Agricultural Innovation in the Western Cape

Agbiz recently hosted its latest Media Information Day in the Western Cape, highlighting the fruit sector, food security, rules of engagement, and agricultural remedies. The event, held at Elsenburg Agricultural College on 23 October 2025, brought together over 90 delegates, including students, media representatives, and industry stakeholders, for a day of insight, discussion, and knowledge-sharing.

Since 2024, Agbiz has been organising these media information days in collaboration with various agricultural commodities. The initiative aims to enhance public and media understanding of the sector, its critical role in the economy, the challenges it faces, and to provide context on narratives that influence its reputation. Following the inaugural session in Paarl with SA Wine, the recent event in Stellenbosch focused specifically on the fruit industry, continuing Agbiz's commitment to engaging stakeholders and fostering informed dialogue.

Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association, was the keynote speaker. He shared a little bit of his personal journey and also spoke about the industry's contribution to South Africa's agricultural success and its role in driving sectoral growth. Dr Ntshabele spoke, among other things, about the importance of trust, respect, and safety in any forum where parties engage with one another. He also highlighted market access, emphasising the importance of opening up new markets while retaining access to existing ones through quality, compliance, and sustainability. He referred to this as the GRO Strategy: Gain, Retain, and Optimise.

- Gain: Expand into new markets through science-based market access protocols.
- Retain: Safeguard existing markets through compliance, sustainability, and quality assurance.
- Optimize: Enhance existing protocols through continuous research and development.

Dr Ntshabele said that the citrus industry is a driver of transformation, inclusion, and growth. The citrus industry's Vision 260 is a quest to export 260 million 15kg cartons by 2032, with the potential to create 100,000 additional jobs. This alignment provides a framework for collaboration between industry and government, ensuring inclusive growth, transformation, and global competitiveness. Behind every carton of citrus shipped are communities that depend on this industry for livelihoods, education, and social stability.

He also highlighted Citrus Research International (CRI), one of the world's leading agricultural research institutions. CRI provides growers with cutting-edge insights in plant pathology, entomology, and pre- and post-harvest management, ensuring that South Africa remains a global leader in evidence-based agriculture.

Dr Ntshabele said that citrus growers are not merely exporters of fruit, but also exporters of knowledge, sustainability, and shared prosperity. He emphasised that the citrus industry, and the broader fruit sector, demonstrate what is possible when science, people, and purpose come together.

Mecia Peterson, CEO of the South African Table Grape Industry (SATI), spoke about the linkages between fruit exports and local food security. She highlighted that we live in a time of unequal abundance, with 14% of food produced lost before it can be sold and another 17% wasted after sale, amounting to a total loss of about 30% of food produced. Globally, roughly one in ten people face hunger each day, while in sub-Saharan Africa the figure rises to about one in every four. According to the latest Stats SA data (2025), food insecurity in South Africa worsened by approximately 22% between 2022 and 2023, driven in part by the impacts of COVID-19 and rapid food price inflation. While the country is food secure at a national level, significant household-level food insecurity persists. Additionally, although South Africa's food prices are competitive internationally, households spend a larger share of their income on food. This is compounded by persistently high unemployment and low GDP growth averaging less than 1% over the last decade.

Although the fruit industry is predominantly export-focused, with only 10% of produce sold as fresh fruit locally, it remains a major employer. In 2024, the industry employed around 320,000 people, supporting approximately 1.28 million dependants. Many producers invest in education for children on their farms and within their communities, providing on-farm daycares, aftercare and learning centres, supporting school maintenance projects, and offering bursaries for tertiary education. The sector also actively combats food waste through various initiatives.

Michael Esmeraldo, Managing Director of Netafim (Southern & East Africa), addressed water innovation and technology in sustainable fruit production. He noted that South Africa is among the 30 driest countries globally and that agriculture is heavily reliant on irrigation. Field crops, fruit, and vegetables account for 33% of the country's total farm income and are directly dependent on irrigation, while the livestock sector 43% of farm income, also relies on water for feed and animal hydration. Mr Esmeraldo stressed the need for improved infrastructure and more efficient water use, noting that water capacity expansion has not kept pace with population growth or the increase in irrigated hectares. He highlighted irrigation system efficiencies and available technologies, cautioning that South Africa must adopt a proactive approach to water conservation.

Wolfe Braude, Agbiz Fruit Desk Manager, provided an overview of South Africa's diversified trade landscape. He noted that 36% of fruit exports go to the European Union, 17% to Asia, 15% to the Middle East, 13% to the United Kingdom, 7% to the USA, and 5% to Africa. He compared agricultural produce exports to other exports, showing that they are nearly twice the value of iron ore exports, nearly three times that of chromium ore, 2.7 times that of South Africa's iron and steel exports, and 1.7 times that of machinery exports. Mr Braude also discussed free trade agreements and South Africa's ongoing efforts to diversify export markets.

Petru Du Plessis, a stone fruit producer, shared the challenges faced by producers, including environmental, political, phytosanitary, and market risks. He highlighted that fruit farming is a long-term commitment, often spanning 20 years, with initial income only realised after three years. He walked attendees through the various phases of production and stressed that farmers and entrepreneurs carry the risks throughout the entire value chain, while maintaining food safety standards.

Panel discussion on agricultural remedies

A panel discussion on agricultural remedies, facilitated by Annelize Crosby, Agbiz's Legal Intelligence Manager, explored how agriculture delivers safe food to consumers. Panellists included Dr Ilse Trautmann, retired Deputy Director-General: Agricultural Research and Regulatory Services, Western Cape; Paula Bester, Food Safety Specialist, Citrus Growers Association; Roleen La Grange, Regulatory Manager, Croplife; and Kobus Hartman, expert in crop protection and agrochemical use.

The discussion covered a wide range of topics, including the regulation and responsible use of agricultural remedies, the necessity of these products, maximum residue limits, the unique challenges faced by smallholder farmers, and the consequences of international chemical companies withdrawing from South Africa. Key points included:

- The quality of produce sold locally is not inferior to exported fruit; in fact, shorter cold chains often mean fresher produce.
- South Africa represents only 1.5% of the global crop protection market, making it a low-profit area for international chemical companies.
- Disinvestment by global players could deprive the country of critical research outcomes, leaving farmers dependent on outdated compounds and threatening international trade.
- South Africa's climate is unstable and unpredictable, with diverse soils, low rainfall, endemic pests, and specific phytosanitary requirements, necessitating tailored agricultural remedies.
- Alternative approaches, such as biological products, are often species-specific and may not fully replace chemical remedies, highlighting the need for integrated pest management (IPM) programs.
- Recent legislative updates (Act 36 of 1947, with amendments in 2023) have phased out highly hazardous pesticides, prioritized low-risk remedies, aligned local regulations with international standards, and enhanced consumer safety.
- Overall, the panel emphasized the importance of a well-designed IPM strategy that integrates chemical, biological, and cultural practices to reduce chemical use while maintaining effective pest control.

The Agbiz Media Information Day highlighted the critical role of the fruit industry in South Africa's economy, food security, and sustainable development. From trade diversification and water innovation to food safety and community support, the presentations underscored the sector's complexity and its contributions to inclusive growth. The event reinforced the importance of collaboration between industry, government, and research institutions to address challenges, safeguard livelihoods, and ensure the continued global competitiveness of South African agriculture.

By Annelize Crosby, Agbiz, Legal Intelligence Manager

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