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State, farmers join hands to fix rural roads

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SAs agricultural sector and the state have embarked on a partnership to tackle one of the biggest threats to rural food production: the country's collapsing rural road network.

Agri SA and Agbiz have teamed up with the departments of public works & infrastructure and transport to run a data-driven pilot project in the Free State, aimed at prioritising and repairing critical agricultural transport routes.

Agbiz CEO Theo Boshoff told Business Day the project was not about short-term fixes such as patching potholes after floods, but about tackling decades of underinvestment and systemic neglect in critical rural infrastructure — a crisis he said was costing the agricultural sector "billions".

"[There are] agricultural businesses that spend up to R50m per year to maintain public infrastructure," he said, adding that this was undermining these businesses' international competitiveness.

"Take grain, for example: it's harvested on farms and transported by truck along dirt roads to a tar road — or sometimes straight to the nearest silo without even reaching a tarred surface.

"From the silo, it moves on to consolidation points, like millers or animal feed manufacturers. So you're dealing with an entire network."

This includes the roads that take goods to ports or border posts for export.

The project stems from an approach made earlier this year at Nampo, SA's premier agricultural expo, where Agri SA and Agbiz appealed directly to public works minister Dean Macpherson.

The initiative, now at the modelling stage, is expected to provide a blueprint for nationwide interventions to unlock growth and competitiveness in the farming sector.

According to Boshoff and Agri SA CEO Johan Kotzé, road maintenance was prioritised based on traffic volumes and accident rates.

But the sector was now urging the state to shift its focus — to prioritise roads based on the economic value they carry.

Infrastructure SA (ISA), an agency of public works, has been tasked with economic modelling, while Agbiz and Agri SA are leading data collection efforts to build a clearer picture of where investment would yield the highest return.

"[ISA is] conducting a demand-flow analysis," said Boshoff.

"They're looking at what agricultural products are being moved, how they move, where they start and end, how frequently, and what their value is."

ISA chief director for external relations and communications Nombulelo Nyathela confirmed that high-level and technical meetings had taken place, and a collaborative agreement was under way.

"This work is at very early stages ... So far, the Centre of Excellence Team at Infrastructure SA is performing complex economic modelling on this work. It is too early to indicate the pipeline at this point," she said.

After the data phase, municipalities will need to be brought on board, as these roads fall under their jurisdiction.

Though the primary focus is on roads, the scope may expand. Boshoff said they had met transport minister Barbara Creecy.

"Her suggestion was to include railways."

This, however, would make the model more complex, he said.

"What's beautiful to me is that we're working together and walking this path side by side. Both [ministers] agreed it made sense.

"It's not just about one farmer complaining that his road is in bad shape — it's about the bigger picture," said Kotzé.

"We have a mountain in front of us, but instead of fighting with each other, we look at the mountain together and figure out what needs to be done."

Macpherson praised the initiative, calling it pragmatic and potentially transformational.

"Our agriculture sector holds great potential for South Africa, not only ensuring our food security, but also to grow our economy and create thousands of new jobs," he said.

"This initiative — formalised under the Strategic Integrated Project for Agri-Logistics, or SIP 11 — is data-driven, pragmatic and focused on real-world outcomes."

Macpherson said while rural roads might not traditionally fall under the direct mandate of his department, "this initiative exemplifies exactly the kind of cross-sector partnership we are championing to deliver tangible impact on the ground". — *BusinessLIVE*