

Publication: Herald, The - Main

Title: State, farmers join hands to fix roads

Publish date: 27 Aug 2025

Page: 2

Reach: 10949

AVE: R 7441.50

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Jana Marx

SA's 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 and infrastructure and transport to run a data-driven pilot project in the Free State, aimed at prioritising and repairing critical agricultural transport routes.

Agbiz chief executive Theo Boshoff said 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 a 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."

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 is now at the modelling stage.

According to Boshoff and Agri SA chief executive Johan Kotze, 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.

Boshoff noted that the roads less travelled were often the ones most critical to the agricultural value chain, used to transport high-value goods from farms to markets.

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

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.

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". — *Business Day*