

MEDIA STATEMENT

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SOUTH AFRICA'S AGRICULTURE SECTOR ENTERS EL NIÑO SEASON IN A STRONGER POSITION THAN IN 2015/16, BUT RISKS REMAIN FOR FARMERS AND FOOD SYSTEMS

Pretoria, 12 October 2026 – Wandile Sihlobo, Presidential Envoy on Agriculture and Land, with the support of the National Agricultural Marketing Council (NAMC) and Bayer, convened a High-Level Roundtable on *El Niño* Preparedness on 12 October 2026, bringing together industry leaders, producer organisations, researchers, agribusinesses and government stakeholders.

The roundtable assessed South Africa's preparedness for a strong *El Niño* event anticipated during the 2026/27 summer production season and explored measures to strengthen resilience across the agricultural sector. Discussions focused on lessons from the 2015/16 *El Niño* drought, current climate forecasts, food security implications, risks facing commercial and smallholder farmers, and actions required to enhance preparedness and coordinated response efforts.

A strong *El Niño* forecast, with possible earlier impacts

Participants heard that forecasts point to a strong *El Niño* event, with the possibility of impacts materialising earlier than is typically observed. While seasonal outcomes remain uncertain, drier and warmer conditions are expected across key summer rainfall areas, particularly during the latter part of the season.

The greatest risks are expected in major grain-producing regions, including the Free State, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Concerns were also raised about the potential impact on grazing conditions, livestock production and farmer incomes should dry conditions persist.

A stronger starting position than in 2015/16

Stakeholders noted that South Africa enters the season in a significantly stronger position than during the 2015/16 drought.

Current dam levels are high, soil moisture reserves have been bolstered by recent rainfall, grain stock levels remain favourable and significant investments have been made in precision agriculture, mechanisation, conservation farming practices and improved seed technologies.

"As of 5 October, in the major dams water levels stood at about 90%. While this is encouraging for irrigated agriculture, it may not mean as much for farmers who depend on rain-fed production. That is why it is important for us to discuss what a potential super El Niño could mean for the sector, particularly for producers who rely on rainfall." Said Dr. Simphiwe Ngqangweni, NAMC Chief Executive Officer.

The expected drought adds on already challenging environment for the farming sector.

Farmers continue to face growing financial pressure due to high input costs, particularly fertiliser, fuel and financing expenses. Access to affordable insurance, adequate cash flow and production finance remains a significant challenge, especially for smallholder and emerging farmers who are the most vulnerable to climate-related shocks.

The livestock sector also faces potential risks, including reduced grazing availability, heat stress and pressure on herd management.

Priority areas identified

Participants highlighted several areas requiring urgent attention:

- Strengthening early warning systems and ensuring farmers have access to timely, reliable and actionable information.
- Promoting conservative planning approaches, including soil moisture conservation and appropriate livestock management practices.
- Supporting smallholder and emerging farmers through improved access to finance, insurance products, risk-management tools and climate-smart technologies.
- Strengthening water management and investing in climate-resilient agricultural infrastructure.
- Encouraging crop diversification and production practices that improve resilience under drought conditions.
- Enhancing coordination between government, industry, financial institutions, researchers and producer organisations to improve preparedness and response.

Commenting on the engagement, Wandile Sihlobo, Presidential Envoy on Agriculture and Land, said:

"Today's conversation was an opportunity for us to assess what the various commodity groups, researchers, agribusinesses and farmers' organisations are observing ahead of what appears to be a challenging summer production season. The discussions confirmed that preparedness must remain a shared responsibility across government, industry and the financial sector. While risks remain, we were encouraged by the sector's stronger starting position, particularly the favourable dam levels, grain stocks and improvements in agricultural technology. Importantly, today's inputs will contribute to government planning processes as we work to strengthen preparedness and resilience across the sector."

Next steps

The outcomes and recommendations emerging from the roundtable will inform government's broader drought preparedness planning and contribute to ongoing intergovernmental engagements on risk mitigation and response measures for the 2026/27 summer production season.

Further engagements will also be undertaken with key stakeholders, including financial institutions and industry bodies, to strengthen preparedness efforts and support vulnerable producers.

THE END

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