



HORTGRO

Growing Fruit IQ



New Roots

Volume 12 July 2026



- 1** The Root Map - Changing of the guard
- 3** Anton Rabe on transformation and economic development
- 6** Jacques du Preez on transformation: Looking ahead
- 9** Transforming agriculture in the Free State through apple farming
- 13** Feeding the hungry and feed the industry
- 17** Boots on the ground at the Pome Field Day
- 19** Embracing change at the Hortgro Technical Symposium

The Root Map

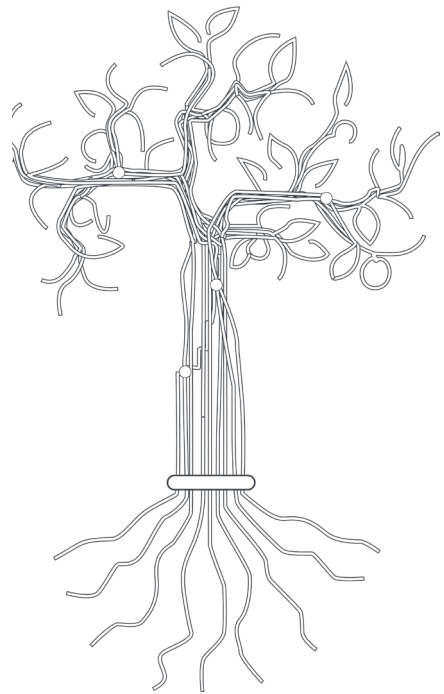
Changing of the guard

“The only constant in life is change,” Greek philosopher Heraclitus said many moons ago.

It is still true after all those years and one of those changes is about to happen at Hortgro. Anton Rabe officially retires from his full-time position as Executive Director in August of this year, but he will never really not be involved. At the same time, Jacques du Preez, currently GM Trade and Markets will take over the reigns as Chief Executive Officer.

During his career he made sure that he was always at the right place at the right time, giving everything, never even thinking “I can’t”. Because it is in his nature to create a better life for as many fellow human beings as possible.

New Roots wants to thank Anton for what he has done for Hortgro over the years and specifically in the area of transformation and economic development. During his career he made sure that he was always at the right place at the right time, giving everything, never even thinking



“I can’t”. Because it is in his nature to create a better life for as many fellow human beings as possible. That’s why transformation makes up a huge part of his efforts.

At the same time New Roots is congratulating Jacques du Preez on his appointment. He brings more than 20 years of experience and know-how in South African agriculture to the table,

specialising in market access, trade policy and market development in the deciduous fruit industry. This is a significant achievement and we are confident that his leadership, vision and experience will contribute greatly to the continued success and growth of Hortgro. His outlook

on transformation and economic development is exciting and is going to take what Anton spearheaded to new heights.

With this news, this edition of New Roots will therefore fittingly feature a flashback story on Anton's contribution and a looking into the future story of Jacques's plans and direction regarding transformation and economic development.

In addition, there's also an insightful feature on apple farming in the Free

State. You will meet Pitso Sekhoto, a man on a mission to get the Free State to outdo the Western Cape. He knows how to open doors. By either knocking on them or kicking them down. Plus a feature on how OneFarm helps hungry people by not letting "wasted" fruit go to waste, as well as a report on the Hortgro Technical Symposium, yet again addressing change with the theme "Growing Forward in a Changing World".

A good read, indeed.



Anton Rabe

on transformation and economic development

The word transformation means different things to different people. There are many opportunists out there to coin as much as they can, often at the cost of others. It is not so easily

definable, but to me transformation must bring meaningful, impactful and economically sustainable change in people's lives. If not it is just window dressing and fronting.



For me it's about change and adaptation, also on a personal level and it is critical that it must be sustainable to be meaningful. Transformation should

getting a long-term tenant (up to 30 years) to farm the land. Those tenants cannot use the land as surety for improvements.

There is still a long way to go, but we've had a good start. There are no quick fixes or silver bullets. Economic development must stretch over generations.

happen within a value chain context that contains economic development and ownership (BEE) as well as training and the development of skills. In fact, everybody does not necessarily want to farm as such, but everyone wants a decent job and place to live.

In 1999, two years after the deregulation of the Deciduous Fruit Board Peter Dall (then the chairperson of the DFPT) and I formulated a "Declaration of Intent" to give the deciduous fruit industry's commitment some direction and focus. It basically provided the roadmap of how we foresaw the route towards transforming the value chain.

The first projects within the policy of Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) of the early days was nothing other than a rent-a-crowd exercise to pool money, mostly grouped in trusts and used to buy bankrupt farms, giving the owners a handy exit and retirement. Another big challenge is the Proactive Land Acquisition Strategy (PLAS) farms where the government buys land for redistribution but remains the owner,

I therefore have comprehension for the fact that there are still parties out there sceptical about the broader agricultural industry's intentions regarding transformation and economic development in general. However, over the past 25 years Hortgro made a significant and successful contribution towards the image of the industry. In a certain sense it is therefore unfair that the faults and perceptions regarding empowerment of other people and institutions still drive the narrative.

We attempted to lay a good foundation by developing a detailed strategic framework which included the Boompie project. The initial aim was to establish 1 000 hectares with new-era producers. Today this project still forms the basis of our economical development programme and after additional Jobs Fund projects we've gone past 1 500 hectares as well as making big investments in other production infrastructures like dams, pipelines, pack houses, cold rooms and equipment such as trucks, pick-ups, tractors and more were financed and donated to emerging

producers.

The booklet, *Deciduous fruit industry changing times* was produced in 2021 and here is an excerpt from the Foreword that I wrote:

As an industry, we have built a proud and proven record of pro-active actions in the transformation and economic development arena since the inception of the programme. These interventions are by no means perfect, but we have a high percentage of success – 90%+ over the last 20+ years – which are both meaningful and impactful. Apart from the human capital development and social impact on worker and community level, the value of the land reform projects over the life span of the orchards established since 2009,

is more than R16 billion. We need to build on this base by growing ownership and participation both at primary level and throughout the value chain.

Financing remains a big challenge. In my opinion, the era of so-called grants is over. We must build on the success of Hortfin who, arguably, put the first blended finance model on the table. Access to more funds like this is a high priority.

There is still a long way to go, but we've had a good start. There are no quick fixes or silver bullets. Economic development must stretch over generations. May the road ahead be even better than the road already travelled.



Jacques du Preez

on transformation: Looking ahead

Much has been achieved in transformation and economic development in the deciduous fruit industry. That progress is important, and continuing this work will always remain strategically and critically important to me.

The recent floods and hailstorms were a reminder that, despite our

differences, we are one industry. Damage to orchards, infrastructure and, in particular, logistics affected everyone, from new era producers to the largest commercial operations. In many ways, it was an equaliser.

The other day, a producer phoned to congratulate me on my new role.

It is not always about access to finance; it is also about access to knowledge, skills and sound business practices.



During our conversation, he remarked that the storms and hail had set him back just as much as they had many other producers. It reinforced something I have long believed. The reality is that the barriers to entering our industry are high for any new entrant, regardless of background. That is something we need to address. One way is through Hortfin, where producers can access favourable financing tailored to the realities of fruit farming.

We have also identified a growing need for management related expertise enterprise support, and this is an area where Hortgro wants to become more involved. It is not always about access to finance; it is also about access to knowledge, skills and sound business practices.

In short, meaningful transformation and economic development was, is, and will always be of critical importance to Hortgro. One of our biggest challenges is helping the enterprises already operating to build sustainable businesses and become commercially successful. More successful producers mean a stronger industry, more good food.

The objective is to grow the industry so that there are more opportunities for more people to participate and benefit, regardless of their background.

Bringing completely new producers into the industry remains a challenge, particularly where producers are allocated farms without secure ownership or long-term, bankable rights, it becomes extremely difficult to raise finance or invest confidently in the future. We will continue working constructively with government and financial institutions to explore practical solutions that enable producers to unlock investment and grow viable businesses.

We also need to focus on those enterprises that have been farming for some time and are close to becoming fully self-sustainable. With the right support including access to blended finance where appropriate we can help more businesses take that final step. As they grow and become sustainable commercial operations, they create space for the next generation of producers to enter the industry. While we have made progress, the percentage of enterprises reaching full commercialisation remains relatively small, which means there is still considerable room for improvement.

When I consider transformation and economic development in the context of my broader responsibility as CEO of Hortgro, I naturally return to the area where I have spent much of my career: market access and development.

In today's world, geopolitical uncertainty makes market access more important than ever. Expanding our markets means increasing

Developing sustainable fruit enterprises is a shared responsibility, and collaboration remains essential.

production. Greater production creates opportunities for more producers, while stronger markets generate the economic returns needed to establish and support the next generation of fruit enterprises.

Ultimately, buyers judge our fruit on its quality, consistency and value. They care that it looks good, tastes right and is competitively priced. Quality is what earns market access.

That is why establishing new producers remains so important. We want government to be our partner in this journey not simply to measure progress, but to help create the conditions that allow more producers to succeed. The objective is to grow the industry so that there are more opportunities for more people to participate and benefit, regardless of their background.

We want to work with everyone who shares our commitment to helping new era producers become commercially successful. Whether it is the Western Cape Government, the national Department of Agriculture, PALS, the Land Bank, the Jobs Fund or other partners, we welcome both financial and technical support. Developing sustainable fruit enterprises is a shared responsibility, and collaboration remains essential.

Many institutions have partnered with Hortgro to support economic development initiatives. The growth of the Hortfin fund, backed by the Jobs Fund and FNB, demonstrates the confidence our partners have in the work we are doing. That trust is something we value, and it motivates us to continue expanding opportunities for the next generation of successful fruit producers.



Transforming agriculture in the Free State through apple farming



Karabo Matshela talking with delegates during the orchard walk

"An aunt of mine on my dad's side married a Karoo farmer and I loved spending time there as a kid. I guess that's where it all began," Kobus du Preez begins the amazing story that lead to a blossoming apple farm near Bethlehem in the Free State. Due to realising that he loved farming he eventually became the owner of Stead Farm, 14 kilometres outside Bethlehem. And because he passionately believes in the future of South

Africa which means he wants to help more South Africans to share in this dream, he is now a shareholder of a farming business operating on Stead Farm.

Introducing Pitso Sekhoto. He is the chairman of Remmoho Investments in Agriculture (RIA) and a prominent leader in South African agriculture, specifically focusing on transforming the Free State sector through apple farming. He leads a 100% black-owned enterprise driving

employment and innovation in the Thabo Mofutsanyana district.

“I realised that Pitso is very driven, doesn’t take no for an answer or gets disheartened. He just knocks on doors and kicks them open until he gets what he wants. An awesome entrepreneur. He is the right person to have as a partner.”

Pitso is aiming to significantly boost the GDP of the Free State and to create up to 500 jobs as soon as possible. Sounds like another Apple guru, doesn’t it? But if your belief is in apples, anything is possible.

There was a high-level farmer’s day held on Wednesday, 30 April 2026 at Stead Farm, Bethlehem where Remmoho CEO Phuti Kubushi said that at present the Western Cape might be the primary producer of apples in SA, but they are struggling with adequate land and water. “Our environment and climate allow us to add to what they are doing in the Western Cape because we

have plenty of land and water from Lesotho. We want to change the perception that the Western Cape is the leader in apple production.”

To prove the point about abundant water, the farmer’s day was a murky, muddy wet affair, but while it deterred some invitees, a handsome crowd came to listen and learn. Everybody loves a good news story.

After the official opening and interesting keynote addresses by the leaders of Remmoho Investments in Agriculture, the rain abated significantly for the orchard walk to take place. Karabo Matshele, assistant manager of Stead Farm (and Pitso’s son-in-law) as well as Pitso himself explains the story of the old and the new orchards.

The time range between old and new is from 1999 to 2025, and the main differences between the old and the new are, firstly, that the new orchards’ rootstocks are more dwarfing than the old. The new orchards have a higher planting density (3 300 trees per hectare versus 1 664). That is 3 m between rows versus 4 m and 1 m between trees versus 1.5 m.

“Our environment and climate allow us to add to what they are doing in the Western Cape because we have plenty of land and water from Lesotho. We want to change the perception that the Western Cape is the leader in apple production.”

The new orchards have been planted with the latest cultivars, such as Lady-in-Red, Buks Gala, Bingo Gala and Fuji Royal. These cultivars have better colour development, so a higher Class 1 pack-out should be achieved, and hence a higher income per hectare.

New growers in the industry have the opportunity to start their farms with the latest cultivars and orchard design with regards to rootstocks, planting density, net system, and irrigation. Challenges like climate, pests, et al. are the same for all type of growers.

The new orchard has a drape net system versus the conventional hail net system of the old orchard. On pruning – before employees are allowed to do too much detailed pruning, they let them focus on one function at a time. The new orchards will need even less pruning as the trees will not be allowed to grow as big as the older ones. Less work will also be needed to be done on ladders, which is time-consuming to move around.

After the orchard tour, it was evident that the walk in the cold Free State fresh air required some nourishment. Oh, my word, lamb on the spit, “boerewors”, chicken on the fire and “stywepap” with chaka-laka and veggies par excellence did the trick before the pack house visit.

Stead Farm uses the Maluti pack house that has been in operation since 2001, a few kilometres from the farm. They expect to pack

8000 tons of apples this season. The sorting and grading are done by a French-made Maf Rhoda machine which has the latest electronic and optic equipment. Packing is done by hand. Quality is assured by checking samples of packed cartons on a continuous basis. Safety protocols have



Apple farming in the mist

been developed over years and are continuously improved. This includes regular training of employees.

Roughly 50% of fruit are exported, and the balance goes to local supermarkets and municipal fresh produce markets. No juicing plant exists in the area. However, they have a strong "hawkers" market which buys most of the low-quality fruit that could have been juiced. The cultivars being packed are Gala types (Royal Gala, Royal Beaut, Bingo Gala and Buks Gala), Early Red One packed as Top Red, African Red, Fuji, Cripps Pink types packed as Pink Lady, Rosy Glow and Lady-in-Red, and Cripps Red.

Assistant Manager Karabo Matshela and his son Oarabile



The only heritage variety they grow and pack is Granny Smith, and these are only grown for cross-pollination purposes. They fetch a much lower selling price than the main cultivars as mentioned above, because the new cultivars are much better tasting. They do not grade according to texture or taste; however, it may become a requirement in future.

Remmoho Investments in Agriculture is a standout example of what new era producers are building in the Free State. What new era producers entering the industry should know about the challenges and opportunities in apple farming in the Free State:

"New era growers should keep up to date with changes in the industry by employing the best consultants in their orchards and pack houses. New growers in the industry have the opportunity to start their farms with the latest cultivars and orchard design with regards to rootstocks, planting density, net system, and irrigation. Challenges like climate, pests, et al. are the same for all type of growers," says Pitso walking into one of his orchards with his grandson in tow.

In fact, wherever you see Pitso, this hardnosed business driver, you'd often see him with one or more of his grandchildren. Hand-in-hand or on his lap. They make a beeline to him, and he to them. Should you ask him about it, the answer is simple.

"Farming is a family business. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

Feeding the hungry and feeding the industry

Every season tons of deciduous fruit end up as waste. What if it can rather help curb hunger?

Under normal circumstances feeling hungry is actually quite a good feeling. Because it creates anticipation, making one wonder what's for dinner. Or breakfast. Three steady meals whenever the hunger pangs set in. Now imagine being hungry but there is no dinner. Going to sleep on an empty stomach. Waking up on an empty stomach. No breakfast. Scrounging your next meal from a trash can. Begging for a morsel.

Stealing money for a meal. Hunger creates crime. It can break up families and threaten communities, infrastructure and ultimately the economy.

Physical symptoms of hunger include headaches, dizziness, fatigue, and feeling weak. There are also the mental, cognitive, and emotional symptoms, including difficulty in concentrating, irritability, anxiety, confusion, brain fog, and a bad short-term memory. People who are unable to afford to eat enough nutrients each day may lapse into chronic variations of the above.



Hunger creates crime. It can break up families and threaten communities, infrastructure and ultimately the economy.

Without food, the body begins to use glucose from the liver for energy. When the glucose reserve runs out after 12 - 16 hours without food, the body switches to burning fat for energy. Good for weight loss for some, but when there's no more fat left, the body turns to muscle for fuel. And ultimately there are only organs left. By now the immune system will have weakened to the point that it cannot fight off illness or heal wounds. It's this vulnerability to infections that usually leads to a starving person's death more so than the actual lack of food itself. Hunger is horror. And it is not a Stephen King story. It is real.

"Your problems pale in comparison with those millions of people in the world who do not have enough to eat." Famous words from famous athlete Michael Johnson. Can we stop this rot?

Yes, OneFarm Impact NPC is reaching out. The good news is that hunger is preventable. We are producing more than enough food to provide for our people. The problem lies in food access.

OneFarm Impact is a purpose-built funding vehicle and impact-driven initiative that facilitates collaboration and partnership opportunities to drive transformation within South Africa's agriculture sector.



Each season, pome- and stone-fruit growers produce surplus, sub-spec, or non-export-grade produce that can't enter formal retail or export channels due to cosmetic defects, market oversupply, logistics disruptions, or export rejections, a quiet but significant cost to the industry. But the fruit is still good food. This can either go

agri-food value chain, connecting commercial growers, small-scale farmers, packers, market agents, and transporters in a collaborative food giving system that redirects perfectly nutritious produce to food-insecure communities, simultaneously tackling food and nutrition shortages, reducing landfill waste, lowering the

There is a saying, “feed the need”, but OneFarm Impact goes one further: “Feed the needy.”

to waste or go towards helping the hungry. Therefore OneFarm Impact's OneFarm Share programme, powered by Standard Bank in partnership with Agri FinTech HelloChoice has created an inclusive and efficient

industry's environmental footprint, and opening pathways for smallholder farmers to access formal markets. While well-established commercial farmers donate their produce, new-era farmers are being paid for their



contribution, helping them to grow their businesses.

Since inception, the programme has distributed more than 30 000 tonnes of fresh produce, providing over 120 million nutritious meals to 1.2 million people regularly. With a blended cost of just R1.30 per meal across the programme's lifetime, OneFarm Share demonstrates that collaboration across the value chain creates multiplied impact and the deciduous fruit industry continues to play a leading role in building a more food-secure South Africa. OneFarm Impact is hungry to stop hunger.

In short, the objectives are:

- To address food waste, smallholder development, and food insecurity.
- Facilitate farm-to-fork impact through funding, logistics, and distribution.
- Connect farmers to markets via demand information, packaging, storage, and payment support.
- Aim to create reliable market access, increase farmers' income, and promote economic scaling.
- Support commercial farmers and smallholder farmers with cost recovery, transaction history, and mentorship.
- Enhance food sourcing, feeding more people, and reducing waste.

Food insecurity, hand-in-hand with unemployment are real crises in South Africa. The challenges are vast. However, come rain or come shine, the agricultural community of this land is resilient. They can work their way around droughts, hail, bugs and pests. Where there is a will, there's a way. A way that means less waste. The industry and OneFarm Impact are together in this, turning waste into opportunity and helping small-scale farmers grow. There is a saying, "feed the need", but OneFarm Impact goes one further: "Feed the needy."

OneFarm Impact encourages partnerships to enhance food systems and farmer support. If you want to know more, get involved or support this good cause with a donation, contact the custodian of the concept, **Dr Thembi Xaba:**
thembi@onefarmimpact.co.za.

It is estimated that, since the turn of the millennium, the number of hungry people worldwide has fallen by 216 million. With enough public determination, this amount will continue to drop until no one in the world goes to bed hungry. OneFarm Impact is part of this determination.

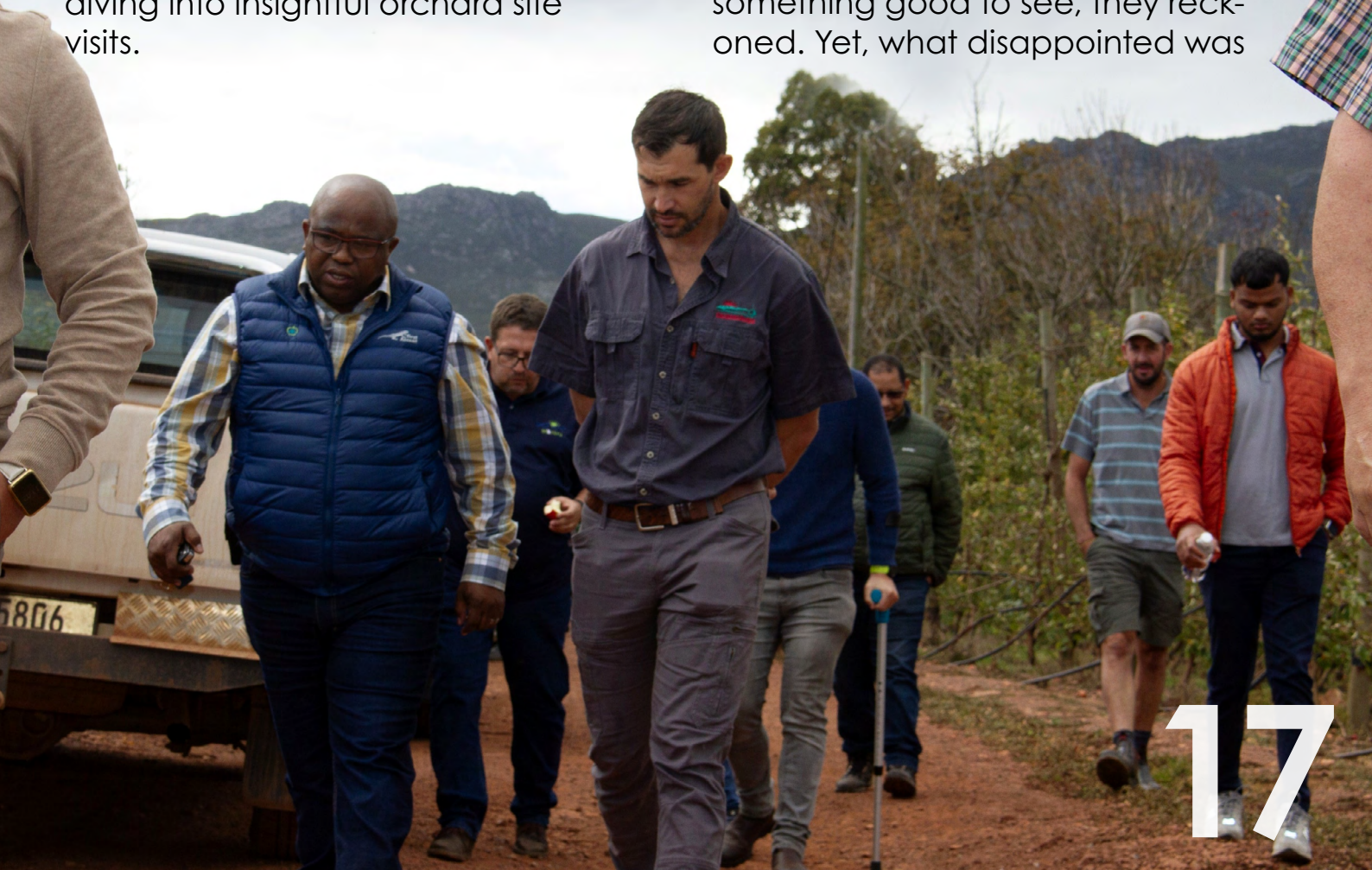
Boots on the ground at the Pome Field Day

As part of the Hortgro Technical Symposium, a practical pome field day was in the offing. Participants got in amongst the fruit on six farms in the Elgin, Grabouw, Vyeboom and Villiersdorp (EGVV) area, namely Glen Elgin, Elgin Orchards, Gelukstroom, Longdown, Apple Garth and Rustfontein.

This year's pome fruit field day aligned well with the week's topics, bringing the discussions to life through practical orchard experience. Gathering on 28 May at Grabouw's Railway Market, producers connected over coffee before diving into insightful orchard site visits.

Visiting multiple farms within the same valley and hearing different technical perspectives provided a valuable and refreshing view of what is possible. It also created an opportunity to learn from growers who are a few years ahead in applying specific practices. Returning to orchards visited in previous years was particularly valuable, as it allowed participants to follow both the challenges and the achievements linked to earlier management decisions.

The delegates said the field day was very enlightening. The tonnes per hectare achieved impressed. It's something good to see, they reckoned. Yet, what disappointed was



that that all the talk was about tonnes and they felt cartons should also be part of the discussion.

"I would like to revisit these orchards in five years time because they are rooted on very lush rootstocks and I wonder if it will always be sustainable. The GRS and FRL blocks we saw were stunning. You must learn as much as you can from other people otherwise you stagnate," Emil Herbst from Doornkraal Agri commented.

The day showcased the incredible innovation and resilience farmers employ to stay competitive during these economically challenging and uncertain times. A critical takeaway

was the shift in yield dynamics: while total production per hectare has grown over the years, pack-out quality has lagged.

"To maximize profitability, the focus must shift to increasing Class 1 tons per hectare. Encouragingly, the trials proved that smart management can unlock high returns even from older rootstocks," Johann Bayer from Chiltern Farms added.

Beyond the technical data, the informal networking between stops, and during car rides, offered invaluable peer-to-peer discussions. It was a highly successful day packed with essential practical lessons for the future.

For more technical information on the pome field day click [here](#).



Embracing change

at the Hortgro Technical Symposium

Themed “Growing Forward in a Changing World”, speakers at the 2026 iteration of the Symposium addressed pertinent issues ranging from market access and biosecurity risks to best practice pertaining to crop protection tools; water constraints; and climate pressures.

They embraced change, as did Winston Churchill years ago when he said that **“to improve is to change”**.

The Hortgro Technical Symposium keeps gaining traction each year. This year, the symposium drew more than 1 600 people over five days, which included a Pome Fruit Field Day and a Stone Fruit Seminar and Orchard Walk.



Dr Khotso Mokhele, Wandile Sihlobo, Prof. William Gumede and André Smit

Local and international thought leaders, producers, scientists, technical advisors, researchers, and deciduous-fruit stakeholders gathered to share and receive valuable industry insights.

The annual Hortgro Technical Symposium continues to grow in stature, as a meeting point where industry experts share invaluable data, trends, and best practises in a rapidly changing global horticultural landscape.

Former National Minister of Agriculture, John Steenhuisen delivered the opening address, where after local adventurer, Riaan Manser took attendees on a “wild ride”. The Business Strategy Day included presentations by Prof. William Gumede, Hendrik du Toit, Wandile Sihlobo, Dr Khotso Mokhele, Dr Ilse Eigelaar-Meets, Prof. Christine Wieck and others.

Click on the [link](#) to see some great presenters in action.



Dr Maanda Rambauli discussing the Plant Health Act and its associated regulations

HORTGRO

Forward in a
Changing World

20