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By Fred Meintjes

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South African blues target China

Access to the country will boost job creation on South African berry farms



The South African Berry Producers' Association (SABPA) has written to South African Agriculture Minister Thoko Didiza to assist in efforts to gain access to China for the country's blueberries.

While announcing a record 2019 blueberry crop, the Association said that if it gained access to the Chinese market, the industry could create an additional 12,000 jobs in South Africa, increasing its projected employment numbers from 14,000 in 2023 to 26,000.

"We are aware that export protocols for other fruits have taken as long as 12 to 17 years to complete," said Jean Kotze, chairperson of the Association. "This means, at this rate, the South African blueberry industry will only gain access to the Chinese market in 2045. For the sake of the many unemployed agricultural workers in South Africa, we cannot afford to wait that long"

He said that the only way for South Africa to take advantage of the job-creating potential of berries was if

government and industry worked closely together to overcome the hurdles impeding access to markets in the Far East.

"We are confident that she (the minister) will do whatever it takes to help us create thousands of jobs in this exciting emerging sector."

Although still a relatively small blueberry producer, the South African industry is showing rapid growth.

"The crop data compiled by the South African Berry Producers Association reveals that the country's blueberry production is expected to reach a record 17,000 tonnes this year, up from 11,300 tonnes in 2018," said Kotze.

This will mean an exponential increase in jobs created, from 1,000 in 2014 to 8,000 in 2019. "Furthermore, by 2023, we expect production to reach 50,000 tonnes which will translate into 14,000 jobs."

Kotze explained that amidst the doom and gloom of South Africa's recently

released unemployment figures, this is a very good story to tell. "However, the story could be so much better if South Africa's blueberry industry can gain access to core export markets in the Far East.

"The potential to grow our export markets is huge," he continued. "At present, approximately 70 per cent of blueberries produced locally are exported. The value of blueberry exports grew from R133m in 2013 to R1.058bn in 2018."

Currently, South Africa does not have access to key markets like China and South Korea at a time when blueberry imports are growing phenomenally in these markets. In China, for example, blueberry imports grew from 2,400 tons in 2013 to more than 12,000 tons by 2017.

China currently imports its berries mainly from Chile and Peru. South Africa should be competing directly with these countries, Kotze said, especially as the country grows high quality blueberry varieties that are preferred by international markets.

"We also have shorter transit times to markets in the east compared to our

South Africa due to the versatility of blueberry crops, which can be grown

blueberries will be a formidable competitor."

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competitors, and the ability to expand production throughout

virtually anywhere," he added. "Given access to these markets, South African

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