

SPEECH BY PREMIER DR PHOPHI RAMATHUBA DURING THE VISIT TO  
ZEBEDIELA CITRUS ESTATE, LEPELLE-NKUMPI LOCAL MUNICIPALITY,  
CAPRICORN DISTRICT

25 FEBRUARY 2026

Programme Director,  
MEC for Agriculture, Ms Nakedi Kekana,  
MEC for LEDET, Mr Tshitereke Matibe,  
Executive Mayor of Capricorn District, Cllr Mamedupi Teffo,  
Mayor of Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, Cllr Merriam Molala,  
Zebediela Ndebele Traditional Council,  
Faith-Based Leaders,  
Leadership of the Bjatladi Communal Property Association,  
Representatives of Women Investment Portfolio Holdings NGO Trust,  
Community members of Zebediela,  
Members of the Media,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thobela, Ndi Matsheloni, Avuxeni, Silotshile, Good Morning, Goeie More

We gather today at a place that is not only a farm, not only an estate, but a living chapter of Limpopo's history, the historic Zebediela Citrus Estate.

For decades, this estate stood as a symbol of agricultural excellence. Spanning approximately 13,785 hectares, Zebediela was once the largest citrus estate in the Southern Hemisphere, a global benchmark for quality citrus production. At its peak, it produced nearly three million cartons of oranges annually for international markets, firmly positioning Limpopo as a key player in global agricultural trade.

But beyond the statistics lies a deeper story.

Zebediela was the economic heartbeat of Lepelle-Nkumpi. It sustained hundreds of permanent workers and thousands of seasonal employees. It supported families, educated children and gave dignity through work. For many households, this estate was a foundation for stability and hope.

When Zebediela declined, the impact went far beyond agriculture. It meant lost livelihoods. It meant shrinking local businesses. It meant weakened rural economic activity. And that is why history would judge us harshly if we allowed an asset of this magnitude to disappear under our watch.

As a caring government, we cannot abandon our people when economic pillars begin to falter. We have a responsibility to intervene, to stabilise and to rebuild. That responsibility brings us here today.

Today marks a decisive turning point. The Limpopo Provincial Government, working closely with the Department of Agriculture and supported by our economic development institutions, has committed itself to ensuring that this sleeping giant awakens once again. A comprehensive Agricultural Master Plan has been finalised, a clear and practical roadmap for recovery, modernisation and long-term sustainability.

This revitalisation is not symbolic. It is structured. It is funded. And it is deliberate.

The full implementation of the programme requires an estimated investment of approximately R500 million. This investment will modernise orchards, upgrade bulk infrastructure, improve processing facilities and strengthen access to both domestic and international markets.

Already, between 2021 and 2024, government invested significantly in improving water infrastructure, electricity supply and agricultural support systems. These interventions were not temporary fixes, they were foundational steps toward renewal.

Programme Director, the estate is currently in a managed transition phase designed to secure long-term sustainability. Immediate priorities include the replacement of approximately 80 percent of orchards that are no longer productive. At the same time, plans are progressing for the establishment of a modern packhouse capable of meeting international export standards.

Equally important has been the protection of land rights and community participation. The Bjatladi Communal Property Association remains the landlord and primary stakeholder of this estate. The land belongs to the community, and its benefits must flow directly to the rightful beneficiaries.

The process of identifying a strategic investor has been rigorous, transparent and guided by accountability. Following technical assessments and planning phases, the Limpopo Economic Development Agency led a structured process to secure a development partner with both capacity and long-term commitment.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to formally recognise and welcome Women Investment Portfolio Holdings NGO Trust as the strategic investor and development partner in the revitalisation of Zebediela.

This partnership represents more than financial investment. It represents confidence — confidence in the agricultural potential of this land, confidence in the people of this community, and confidence in the future of Limpopo.

Central to the Master Plan is the commercial development of approximately 4,000 hectares of citrus orchards, more than doubling the historic footprint of 1,800 hectares. This expansion will reposition Zebediela as a major citrus producer within both national and international markets.

But the vision does not end with citrus.

The estate will diversify into macadamia production and a range of cash crops, including beans, potatoes and vegetables. This diversification ensures year-round productivity, improved cash flow and resilience against market fluctuations.

At full operational capacity, the revitalised estate is projected to create more than 2,000 direct jobs across horticulture, processing, logistics and maintenance. In addition, approximately 1,500 indirect employment opportunities are expected to emerge through suppliers, transport operators, small enterprises and secondary economic activities throughout the Capricorn District.

This is how rural economies are rebuilt, not through promises, but through structured investment and inclusive participation.

The revitalisation programme places strong emphasis on local inclusion. A “Local First” recruitment approach will prioritise employment for community members. A comprehensive skills transfer programme will equip young people with expertise in modern farming techniques, agribusiness management and international trade standards.

We are not simply restoring orchards. We are restoring skills. We are restoring confidence. We are restoring dignity.

Programme Director, the revival of Zebediela is aligned with the Limpopo Development Plan and our broader strategy to strengthen agricultural and agro-processing value chains. Agriculture remains one of the most powerful drivers of inclusive growth in our province. When agriculture thrives, rural towns thrive. When rural towns thrive, provinces prosper.

Once the pride of the citrus world, Zebediela must reclaim its place — this time built on inclusive growth, transparent governance and community empowerment.

By the end of this decade, this estate will once again stand as a symbol of Limpopo’s agricultural strength. It will bear fruit not only in orchards, but in employment, enterprise development and shared prosperity.

Let today be remembered as the day we chose renewal over decline.

The day we chose partnership over fragmentation.

The day we chose action over hesitation.

Working together, government, investors and the community — Zebediela will indeed bear fruit once more.

I thank you.