

August 4, 2026

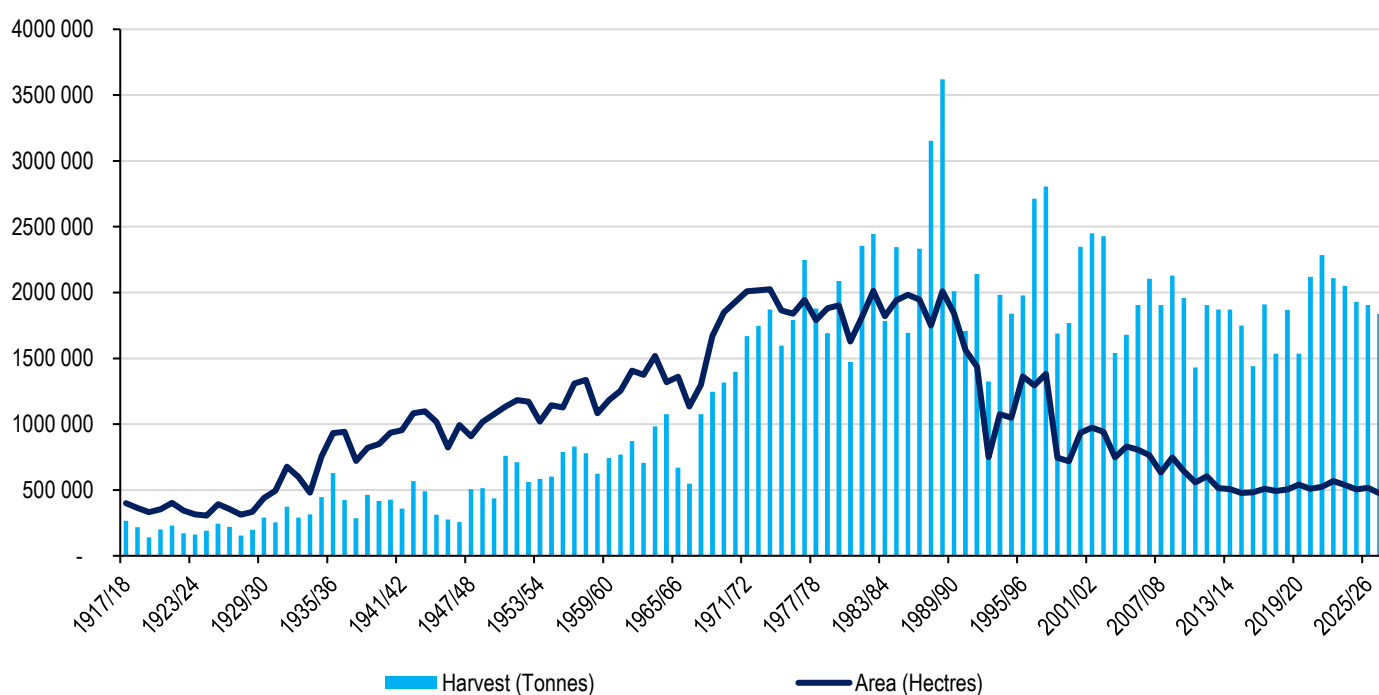
South Africa may have planted the smallest wheat area in nearly a hundred years

- The overarching theme of South Africa's agricultural outlook for 2026 has been broadly positive, particularly for field crops and horticulture. But not all industries in these subsectors are experiencing favourable production conditions. The wheat industry is under strain. The ample global wheat supplies at lower prices at various times in the past few months, combined with higher input costs on the back of the Middle East war and the unfavourable weather conditions in some parts of South Africa's wheat-growing regions, have led to a reduction in area plantings. These pressures, amongst other things, contributed to the wheat industry's decision to seek an increase in the wheat import tariff, to cushion the domestic industry from the lower prices and subsidised imported wheat. These trade policy questions are important, and the import tariff adjustment approach must seek a balance between consumer welfare and farmers' welfare, amongst other considerations.
- Clearly, now the domestic wheat industry is under pressure, and the farmers are slashing the plantings. For example, in the 2026-27 winter wheat crop, South African farmers lowered wheat plantings to 473 900 hectares, down 8% from the previous season, according to the latest data from the Crop Estimates Committee (CEC). Worryingly, this is the smallest area planted to wheat since 1929, when 439 000 hectares were planted to wheat.
- About 69% of the area planted to wheat is in the Western Cape, followed by the Free State, which accounts for 11% of South Africa's winter wheat plantings, the Northern Cape with 8%, Limpopo with 5%, and other small plantings in KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. Therefore, the provinces that are the anchors of South Africa's wheat industry are the Western Cape, Free State, Northern Cape and Limpopo. The plantings for the 2026-27 season have declined notably in most of these major provinces, with the Northern Cape roughly unchanged. It is unclear how much this decline in area plantings will mean for the overall harvest. The first official winter wheat production estimate will be released by the CEC on August 26, 2026.
- Still, if we take the average 5-year wheat yield of 3,88 tonnes per hectare, in an area of 473 900 hectares, then South Africa could end up with a crop of about 1.8 million tonnes. This would be down 4% from the 2025-26 season, and the smallest crop in six seasons. Given that the area plantings are the smallest in nearly a hundred years, a wheat harvest that would be the smallest in six seasons would be a much better outcome than some fear.
- With that said, the yield outcome, amongst other things, will be influenced by the weather conditions and the level of input the producers apply. Therefore, we will have a better understanding of the yield

later this month, but it is probably fair to assume that if history is a better guide, we could end up with a wheat harvest of around 1.8 million tonnes in the 2026-27 production season. Such a harvest would mean that South Africa would have to import about 1.9 million tonnes of wheat in the 2026-27 season, which would be mildly up from the expected imports of 1.8 million tonnes in the current 2025-26 season.

- From a consumer side, while these figures and the extent of a decline in the winter wheat plantings are worrying, supplies will be available. The ample global wheat supplies, which the International Grains Council forecast at 821 million tonnes, down 3% year-on-year, but well above the long-term average, will help. South Africa will be able to secure affordably priced wheat to serve domestic needs in the near term. Still, this doesn't take the focus away from the important policy questions of finding a balance in trade policy to support the domestic wheat industry, while also accommodating consumer well-being. These are important trade-offs that the government and industry must grapple with so that the wheat industry does not deteriorate further.

Exhibit I: South Africa's winter wheat plantings and production over time



Source: Crop Estimates Committee and Agbiz Research