

IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

Citrus exports set for growth despite global challenges

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South African citrus exports are set for moderate growth in the 2026 season, according to the latest forecast released by the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA).

CGA data projects that the country will export a total volume of between 210m and 215m 15kg cartons across all varieties.

This represents an approximate 3% to 5% increase on the previous season, driven by a balanced crop of high-quality fruit despite ongoing global uncertainties.

Estimates for all varieties excluding late mandarins, which form the bulk of the mandarin crop, have been released. Late mandarin figures are expected in about a month's time.

"We are acutely aware of the uncertainties the industry faces with the current war in the Middle East's potential effect on demand, shipping, fuel availability, and input costs," said CGA chief executive Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele.

"But, should all that is possible be done to limit the impact of these factors, steady growth towards another record export season is within reach."

The CGA said it had strengthened its data and market intelligence capabilities as well as its specialist monitoring forums, to enable timely adjustments and support logistics planning.

According to the forecast, variety-specific estimates point to strong performance in lemons and grapefruit, with more moderate movements in oranges and early mandarins.

Lemons are forecast at 45.9 million 15kg cartons, a 10% rise from last year's 41.6 million cartons.

The growth stems from young trees entering production in the Sundays River Valley and recovery in the Senwes (Marble Hall and Groblersdal) region following past hail damage.

Navel orange exports are expected to reach 30 million 15kg cartons, a 5% decline from 2025's record but still 10% above 2024 levels.

The category breaks down into 13.4 million cartons of early/midseason navels and 16.6 million cartons of late navels.

Valencia oranges are projected to reach 63 million 15kg cartons, a 1.6% increase from 62 million last year. Northern regions anticipate gains of 4% to 17%, after the January floods caused no major damage.

Southern regions in the Eastern and Western Cape expect 7% to 20% lower volumes due to drier summer conditions and alternate bearing, while increased production in Zimbabwe and new entries from Botswana and Mozambique are also expected.

Grapefruit exports are estimated at 15.7 million 17kg cartons, up 16% from 13.5 million last year, largely due to optimal growing conditions. Early indications suggest slightly smaller fruit sizes, with wet conditions in northern areas affecting initial harvesting.

Among early mandarins, satsuma volumes are expected to close around 1.5 million 15kg cartons, similar to 2024. Nova shows a 3% decrease to 5.6 million cartons, while clementines are projected at 6.2 million cartons, down 4%.

Ntshabele highlighted domestic factors that could further unlock growth despite uncertain global conditions.

"Considering the global instability, it is essential that attention be given to factors which are within South Africa's control and can unlock the potential of our citrus export sector.

“A number of constraints can be addressed to secure the future growth of our industry. Enhanced market access to China, India and the United States would provide a meaningful boost to the industry. The European Union’s unnecessary and unscientific plant health requirements for South African citrus is also a constraint and remains unresolved.”

Ntshabele said improved logistics efficiency – especially in the rail network – would require greater participation from the private sector.

