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SA citrus exports get China boost aft protocol update

South Africa's citrus exports to China are set to become more efficient and compet following an updated plant health protocol that introduces additional phytosanitary treatment options.

Source: Department of Agriculture X account - screengrab

The agreement between South African and Chinese authorities is expected to lower costs, imp fruit quality outcomes and strengthen the country's position in a key growth market for citrus exports.

Science-led protocol strengthens compliance

The Department of Agriculture (DoA) and the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (C said the amended protocol is based on a science-driven, risk-managed approach to plant heal compliance, underpinned by research from Citrus Research International (CRI).

The changes were developed through collaboration between South African and Chinese autho and introduced additional pest risk mitigation treatment options for exporters.

Industry stakeholders say the updated framework is expected to improve the quality of citrus reaching Chinese consumers while reducing compliance and logistics costs for exporters.

This is also expected to enhance export efficiency and support stronger long-term growth of S African citrus in the Chinese market.

China remains key growth market

China is already an established destination for South African citrus, particularly Navel oranges, lemons and grapefruit.

In 2025, exports to China and Hong Kong accounted for approximately 11.5 million cartons, or around 6% of total exports, with further growth potential driven by strong demand and counter seasonal supply advantages.

South African citrus complements China's domestic production by ensuring year-round availab of fruit varieties for consumers.

"South Africa places a high value on its relationship with China, which continues to create meaningful opportunities across our agricultural sector," said Minister of Agriculture in South Africa, John Steenhuisen.

"These agreements are the result of trust, respect and sustained cooperation, and they are hel open doors for our producers at a time when diversification has never been more important."

"South African citrus has excellent quality and complements China's domestic citrus productio due to your counter-seasonal supply. That is a very positive contribution to Chinese consumers fruit baskets. With China's huge market of 1.4 billion people, our cooperation has enormous potential and bright prospects.

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"This agreement for further access to the Chinese market cannot be more timely, because Sou Africa's citrus season this year is just beginning and going very strong. It reflects the high level China-South Africa bilateral relations and the deep friendship between our peoples."

CGA CEO Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele said the organisation remains focused on strengthening ma access and ensuring long-term sustainability of the citrus sector.

"The CGA remains committed to working closely with government and international partners t strengthen market access, uphold high phytosanitary standards, and support the sustainable growth of the citrus industry."

He also welcomed cooperation between South African and Chinese authorities and reaffirmed ongoing engagement to advance trade opportunities.

The CGA also welcomed progress in broader South Africa–China economic cooperation, inclu the Economic Partnership Agreement Framework signed in February 2026 and proposed tariff reductions.

If implemented, these measures are expected to improve the competitiveness of South Africar citrus exports in the Chinese market.

The association continues to advocate for citrus inclusion in a proposed "Early Harvest agreement", which could allow the sector to benefit sooner from tariff reductions during the 20 season.

Economic importance of citrus sector

South Africa's citrus industry remains a major export earner and rural employer.

In 2025, Southern Africa exported approximately 204 million cartons of citrus, with South Afric accounting for around 193 million cartons, reinforcing its position as the second-largest citrus exporter globally.

Export earnings exceeded US$2.47bn for the first time.

The sector supports approximately 140,000 direct jobs at farm and packhouse level, with wide employment across logistics, export services and distribution, making it a key driver of rural economic activity.