

OPINION

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: Market access is key to growth of citrus industry

Success of 2026 season hinges on resolving trade issues

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BD Boitshoko Ntshabele



The EU remains South Africa's largest citrus market, says the writer. (SUPPLIED)

South African citrus growers packed a record 203.7-million cartons of citrus for export last year – 22% more than in 2024.

This growth is worth celebrating but it is crucial to recognise a simple economic truth: increased volumes do not automatically translate into more jobs or a stronger sector. It can only happen if the new volumes align with improved, expanded global market access.

The 2026 South African citrus season — set to start in earnest in about April — represents a critical juncture for our country's largest agricultural export industry. If trade negotiations fail to broaden access or create new markets in the near future, the citrus industry is likely to stagnate and decline.

Conversely, if South Africa successfully broadens its market footprint the

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The EU remains South Africa's largest citrus market. This past season 35% of all our citrus was exported to it. Yet, the EU's unscientific and unnecessarily trade-restrictive plant health measures on false codling moth and citrus black spot still cost our growers almost R4bn per year.

In 2023 South Africa triggered dispute mechanisms at the World Trade Organisation to challenge these measures. The matter is still unresolved. Resolving it in line with scientific principles would boost our sector considerably — freeing almost R4bn that growers could reinvest in their farms.

Apart from the EU, the US still offers immense potential. In November the Citrus Growers' Association of South Africa (CGA) welcomed the US tariff exemption specifically for oranges. This was welcome news, especially for producers in the Western and Northern Cape that rely on the US market.

What remains of concern is that the exemption excluded mandarins as a citrus type, so they still face the 30% reciprocal tariffs. Our mandarins are popular in the US. Extending the exemption to include mandarins and other citrus varieties makes sense as they share similar market dynamics and supply chain vulnerabilities.

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Though South Africa's trade negotiations with the US are unfolding under strained circumstances, the enduring logic of mutual benefit remains evident. South African citrus season is counter-seasonal to that of the US and poses no

threat to US production and jobs. In fact, it helps to keep consumers in the citrus category in the long run.

The Brics grouping should be working towards a trade agreement to encourage trade with each other. The present relationship and arrangements have failed to translate into trade benefits for South African agriculture. While there has been some progress towards updated citrus protocols and tariff relief with some member countries there has been no tangible outcome for growers yet.

At stake is not just job creation and export earnings but the development of entire rural communities. In many towns citrus is the heart of the local economy. Citrus contributes to rural resilience through investments in infrastructure, skills development and community programmes, and by creating demand for goods and services such as packaging, transport, cold storage and agricultural inputs, which sustains local businesses.

As the world's second-largest citrus exporter the industry is vital for South Africa's economy in earning foreign currency. Broadened access would not only secure the livelihoods of more than 140,000 workers at farm level but also unlock the potential for tens of thousands of new jobs.

In an environment of sluggish national growth, a flourishing citrus sector acts as a catalyst for rural development and logistics infrastructure upgrades, proving that the success of the 2026 harvest is inextricably linked to South Africa's broader path toward economic recovery.

It is market access that connects the quiet rows of local orchards with the tables of millions of overseas consumers. Without this connection the promise of rural development remains rhetoric rather than reality.

While we celebrate the record volumes of the previous season we also look towards translating future increases in production into true sustainable growth for all.

• *Ntshabele is CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa.*

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