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Citrus growers welcome tariff-free trade deal

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The Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) has welcomed last week's announcement of a framework trade deal between South Africa and China as a "significant development" for citrus growers, the industry, and rural communities reliant on exports.

CGA chief executive Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, writing in his latest newsletter, described the prospect of tariff-free entry for South African citrus into China as "a remarkable opportunity".

Ntshabele said many global competitors already benefited from existing free trade agreements granting them preferential access. However, the new framework can lead to a level playing field and expanded competition in one of the world's largest markets.

The agreement targets an Early Harvest Agreement by the end of March.

"With our citrus season beginning in April, the timing seems perfect. We remain hopeful that producers will see the benefits in the coming season," Ntshabele said.

"South African citrus production is on an upward trajectory. The record-breaking 2025 season only confirms what we see on the ground: our industry is scaling, innovating, and driving economic opportunity."

He stressed that higher volumes required broader market access beyond China.

"But volume alone is not enough. To unlock the full value of increased production, we need expanded access to all markets, not only China, but also the European Union, the United States and India," he said.

"Improved trade conditions translate into job creation, rural development, and economic potential. These are not abstract benefits. They are livelihoods. They are families. They are communities knit together by the profitability of our industry.

"Congratulations to government for concluding the framework with China, and we urge swift implementation."

Trade between the two countries dates back to 2004, when South African citrus first entered China.

"Over that time, export protocols have been revised repeatedly, with each revision strengthening trade and improving entry conditions," he said, commending China's process.

"China's approach – grounded in scientific justification – is one we appreciate. These advancements show what is possible when both nations commit to ongoing scientific dialogue and trade facilitation," he said.

"It is fascinating to reflect that China is the home of citrus fruit. The earliest true citrus species supposedly evolved in south-central China around eight million years ago. Later species emerged in the Himalayan foothills, the very region closely linked to our other key market, India. As we pursue improved access to the Chinese and Indian markets, there is something poetic in reconnecting the South African citrus story with its ancient origins."

Meanwhile, Ntshabele has announced expanded access to its Business Intelligence dashboards this year.

Previously limited to growers with a valid CGA member number, the dashboards – showing daily inspection and export data – will now be available to South African exporters.

Information sessions on navigating and interpreting the dashboards will be held in March.