

SA agriculture outpaces trade barriers with 10% export growth

South Africa's agricultural export sector is projected to surpass \$13.7bn in 2026, led by strong demand for high-value horticultural products such as citrus, grapes and macadamia nuts. But exporters are facing mounting pressure from congested ports, ageing rail infrastructure, and slow cross-border payment systems, which are steadily eroding profits, according to research by cross-border payments platform Verto.



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Verto's South African Agricultural Exporters Report shows that agricultural exports grew 10% year-on-year in the first nine months of 2025, with horticulture continuing to underpin the sector's resilience.

Market diversification into Africa and expanded BRICS economies, including China and India, has further supported export growth and reduced reliance on traditional markets facing increasing trade barriers.

Despite this momentum, exporters operate in an increasingly fragile environment. Persistent congestion at major ports, operational delays, and deteriorating rail infrastructure continue to disrupt supply chains, particularly for time-sensitive and perishable goods. These inefficiencies increase demurrage costs, raise the risk of spoilage, and reduce returns for producers.

“South African agricultural exporters are producing globally competitive goods, but too much is being lost between the farm gate and the final buyer,” said James Booth, head of Revenue at Verto. “While export volumes are rising, inefficiencies in logistics and financial systems are quietly eating into profit margins.”

Financial agility key to protecting margins

The report also flags growing trade policy uncertainty, including the potential non-renewal or revision of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Without AGOA, key exports such as citrus, wine and nuts could face tariffs of between 3% and 15% in the US market, significantly undermining competitiveness.

Cross-border payment inefficiencies — slow settlement times, high banking fees, and unfavourable foreign exchange rates — further reduce net earnings, particularly in a volatile rand environment.

According to Verto, exporters using modern financial technologies, including multi-currency accounts, faster settlement rails, and proactive currency risk management, are better positioned to protect margins while broader infrastructure reforms remain slow.

“Exporters cannot fix ports or rail networks overnight, but they can take immediate control of how money moves across borders,” added Booth. “Optimising payment processes is one of the fastest and most practical ways to stabilise margins in an increasingly challenging operating environment.”

The report concludes that sustaining growth in South Africa’s agricultural exports will require a focus: continued investment in logistics and infrastructure, alongside greater financial agility to reduce operational friction and protect profitability.

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