South African zero tariffs to China hinge on phytosanitary protocols

China will grant zero-tariff access to South African agricultural exports from 1 May 2026 under the China-Africa Economic Partnership Agreement. Until now, producers faced "middle-income" tariffs of 10% to 25%, while competitors such as Chile and Australia exported duty-free.

However, tariff removal does not replace phytosanitary approval. Export access to China requires compliance with two separate regulatory systems.

The tariff requirement is managed by the Ministry of Trade and determines the financial entry conditions at the border. From 1 May, this rate will drop to 0%.

The phytosanitary protocol is managed by the GACC, China's Customs authority. This functions as the scientific clearance mechanism. Products without a signed phytosanitary protocol are not permitted entry, regardless of tariff level. China's health standards remain in place irrespective of tariff policy.

Several sectors already have approved protocols and can immediately benefit from zero-tariff status.

Stone fruit, including plums, peaches, and nectarines, secured a unified protocol in late 2025, signed by Minister John Steenhuisen. Citrus, apples, and pears operate under long-standing agreements and will see their existing 11% to 12% tariffs removed.

The nut sector, including macadamias and pecans, also holds established phytosanitary protocols. Removal of the 12% tariff on macadamias will apply from 1 May.

For cherries and blueberries, tariff removal does not yet translate into market access. These industries are undergoing Cold Treatment Trials, which require maintaining fruit at -0.6°C for up to 24 days to eliminate larvae.

Until the GACC signs the required phytosanitary protocol, exports of these products remain restricted. Industry expectations are focused on securing protocol approval in time for the 2026/27 harvest season.

Source: Agri News (https://agrinews.co.za/why-the-phytosanitary-protocol-is-the-real-key/)
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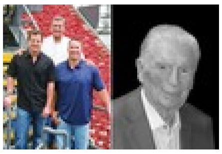

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