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SA's citrus export 'win' puts logistics support in focus

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South Africa's rise to the top of global citrus export rankings has put renewed focus on the logistics, shipping and market-access pressures facing local growers.

South Africa exported 2.9 million tonnes of citrus in 2025, narrowly overtaking Spain to become the world's largest citrus exporter by volume, according to the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA).

The achievement, confirmed in recently finalised 2025 export statistics, reflects the steady expansion of South Africa's export-orientated citrus industry and its growing role in global supply chains.

Despite the export achievement, local growers remain under mounting pressure from logistics and market challenges. "Volume is just one single measure with which to assess an industry. South African growers continue to face challenges. Currently the impact of the situation in the Middle East on fuel costs and shipping routes is a concern which is placing significant pressure on grower margins," said CGA chief executive, Boitshoko Ntshabele.

"Growers also face unpredictable price and market dynamics, rising input costs as well as market access issues such as high tariffs and unscientific plant health measures."

Continued growth in production highlighted the urgent need for improved market access into key destinations including the EU, the United States, India and China, the association said.

The CGA's long-term growth strategy, Vision 260, aims to increase exports to 260 million cartons by 2032.

The organisation stressed, however, that the milestone related specifically to exports and not overall citrus production.

"South Africa is not the world's largest citrus producer, with significant volumes of citrus produced in countries such as China, Brazil and Spain – largely serving their domestic markets," the association said.

The CGA added that the result should also be viewed in the context of tighter export availability from Spain, where growers had faced difficult climatic and production conditions in recent seasons.

"These shifts underline how finely balanced global citrus supply has become, rather than signalling any structural change in Europe's importance to the category," the association said.

According to the CGA, South Africa and Spain continue to play complementary roles in the global citrus value chain, with Spain supplying Northern Hemisphere markets during its domestic season and South Africa filling shelves during the Northern Hemisphere summer months.

"This seasonal coordination ensures that Northern Hemisphere consumers have consistent access to world-class citrus throughout the year, supporting category stability, shelf presence, and long-term consumption."

The latest data highlighted South Africa's strong compliance with international plant health and sustainability standards, its high fruit quality and long-standing integration into global supply chains, the association said.

"To overtake a citrus export giant like Spain, even by a small margin, is no easy feat. We are known for our world-class-quality fruit and strict compliance with international plant health standards," said Minister of Agriculture John Steenhuisen.

Steenhuisen highlighted the need for stronger infrastructure and trade support.

"Our production growth must be met with intensified diplomacy and infrastructure support. We are continuously looking for new market opportunities while working to ensure that we expand our current markets," he said.

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