South African exporters brace for higher tariffs after U.S. AGOA decision

South Africa's planned exclusion from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) from January 1, 2027, is expected to increase costs for citrus exporters supplying the U.S. market. The Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA), Exporters Western Cape (EWC), and Cape Chamber have raised concerns about trade competitiveness, employment, and market access.

Without AGOA preferences, South African citrus would face U.S. import duties of between 1.5 and 2.5 U.S. cents per kilogram, depending on the product and timing. Mandarins, lemons, and grapefruit would also face an additional 12.5 per cent Section 301 tariff. Oranges, exempt from additional tariffs since November 2025, would become subject to normal import duties.



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CGA CEO Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele noted that South African citrus supplies the U.S. market during its domestic off-season. The association warned that growers in the Western and Northern Cape, particularly around Citrusdal, face exposure because orchards have been established specifically for U.S. exports.

"A citrus grower cannot simply divert his crop to another market – markets have different phytosanitary requirements and consumer tastes. Entire orchards have been planted specifically for the U.S. market. Our exclusion from AGOA will result in job losses in the Western and Northern Cape. It is too early to say how many, but some people will unfortunately lose their jobs when this happens," said CGA Chairman Gerrit van der Merwe.

EWC reported that Western Cape exports to the U.S. declined 41 per cent, from R16.89 billion (US$1.02 billion) to R10.02 billion (US$603.37 million), between August 2024 and July 2025 and August 2025 to July 2026.

Citrus exports fell 17 per cent, from R2.19 billion (US$131.88 million) to R1.82 billion (US$109.59 million). Fruit juice exports declined 86 per cent, from R952.9 million (US$57.38 million) to R136.7 million (US$8.23 million), while grape exports decreased 79 per cent, from R444.2 million (US$26.75 million) to R91.1 million (US$5.49 million).



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According to EWC, Western Cape exports to the U.S. support approximately 11,914 direct jobs, 35,467 indirect jobs, and R12.98 billion (US$781.62 million) in provincial GDP.

The United States Trade Representative cited trade barriers, corruption, and U.S. national security and foreign policy concerns as reasons for the proposed exclusion.

EWC chairman Terry Gale called for government engagement with affected industries, while the Cape Chamber emphasized bilateral discussions before implementation. Both organizations identified market diversification and domestic logistics constraints as areas requiring attention.

The proposed changes would also affect competitiveness against suppliers such as Peru and Chile, which benefit from trade agreements and shorter shipping distances.

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