

US tariffs on South African citrus set to hurt growers as season starts

By [Fred Meintjes](#) | 8 April 2025

Growers and rural communities set to feel the effects of 30 per cent tariffs as well as South Africa's other key markets

South Africa's citrus industry has been forced to reckon with a new 30 per cent import on citrus exports to the US on the eve of the season.



The additional tariff imposed by the Trump administration could make South African citrus uncompetitive in the US market. At the same time, only 10 per cent has been levied on competing South American countries, giving them an advantage over South African exporters.

South African citrus growers are supposed to start packing their new season crop for shipment to the US market during the same week the tariffs are due to come into effect (9 April).

“Increased tariffs will hurt South African citrus farms and the rural communities they support,” said the Citrus Growers’ Association of Southern Africa (CGA).

The CGA has called on the South African government to prioritise immediate negotiations with the US administration on tariff reductions or exemptions on the imports of South African citrus fruit.

“This is urgently needed to avoid job and revenue losses in the citrus industry, South Africa’s largest agricultural export industry,” said the CGA.

“While South Africa only exports about 5-6 per cent of our citrus to the US, many rural communities in the Western and Northern Cape are heavily dependent on US exports. A prime example of this is Citrusdal, where exports to the US form the economic heart of this vibrant rural town.”

The CGA said the severity and immediate nature of the impending tariffs could mean that towns like Citrusdal now face either increased unemployment or maybe even total economic collapse.

“There is immense anxiety in our communities,” said Gerrit van der Merwe, chairperson of the CGA and a citrus grower in the Olifants River Valley. He said 35,000 jobs are connected to South African-US citrus exports in one way or another.

“The additional 30 per cent tariff will make South African citrus uncompetitive in the US market, especially since only the baseline US tariff of 10 per cent will be levied on South Africa’s citrus competitors, who are mostly situated in South America. The 30 per cent tariff will place an additional US\$4.25 per carton on South African citrus in the US,” he noted.

Boitshoko Ntshabele, chief executive of the CGA, said there were clear and convincing arguments for why the South African government must act swiftly and decisively to safeguard the country’s citrus.

“Citrus is not produced in a factory. South African citrus growers do not compete with US citrus growers. In fact, quite the opposite, our high quality produce sustains consumer interest when US local citrus is out of season, eventually benefiting US growers when we hand over at the end of our season,” Ntshabele explained.

“Citrus should be on the White House’s exemption list. It is seasonal, and it supports both US health and the US citrus industry, while it helps to keep food inflation down,” added Van der Merwe.

The US demand for South Africa’s citrus has been shown by the increase in exports to the US since 2017. The volume of citrus exported to the US has almost doubled since then, to over 6.5mn

EUROFRUIT estimated that 20,000 jobs up and down the supply chain in the US are linked to US-South African citrus trade.

Although only citrus fruit from the Western and Northern Cape is exported to the US because of phytosanitary rules, if the tariffs come into effect, large amounts of the citrus destined for the US will be redirected to other markets. This could destabilise these markets, with a knock-on effect on the entire Southern African citrus industry.

“The US volumes cannot be easily absorbed elsewhere at such short notice,” explained Ntshabele. “Also, we already face very steep tariffs with exports to promising markets like India and China. We appreciate the government’s announcement that it will intensify efforts to diversify export destinations - targeting Asia, Europe, the Middle East, to name a few. However, we need to retain current markets as well, as our citrus production is projected to increase substantially in the next few years,” he continued.

Ntshabele said increases in exports to the US were one of the cornerstones of the CGA’s target to create 100,000 additional jobs by 2032.

“We are now looking at a potential situation wherein not only will we be facing job losses, but we also lose the potential of serious job growth - a double tragedy. The South African government should urgently work towards a new trade agreement with the US, but such agreements can take years, and we do not currently have the time. The 2025 season has already arrived, and the produce is making its way to the ports,” he concluded.

