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OPINIONISTA

G20 side meetings offer opportunities for expansion of SA's agri trade



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Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele is the CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa.

With leaders and ministers from the world's most powerful economies gathering here, we have a unique and time-sensitive opportunity. Instead of focusing intensely on broad multilateral trade negotiations, our government should be using these meetings for targeted, bilateral discussions on the sidelines. The citrus industry could use the opportunity to propose packaged deals and limited offers that would fast-track market access.



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South Africa's G20 presidency comes at a time when global trade is facing levels of uncertainty and disruption not experienced for decades. While the G20 summit in November in Johannesburg is an opportunity to project a positive image of our nation internationally, it also offers an opportunity to fast-track bilateral discussions that could reshape the global trade landscape to help protect our economy. If South Africa does not make use of this opportunity, we will regret it later.

Citrus is South Africa's largest agricultural export industry and has been uniquely affected by the shifts and tensions of the past few months. The Trump administration's recent introduction of a 30% tariff on goods imported from South Africa is making our citrus uncompetitive in the US.

When the tariffs became active, on Thursday, 7 August 2025, we had passed the peak of this year's citrus season. Local growers managed to accelerate shipments to the US before the deadline, which has lessened some of the effects of the tariff on the current season's exports. But should a mutually beneficial trade deal not be concluded, our next export season will unfortunately feel the full effect of the tariff. Rural communities could then be hit hard.

When this is outlined to decision makers, the citrus and many other affected industries have often heard a response along these lines: diversify markets and shift goods elsewhere. Unfortunately, things are not so simple.

The citrus industry's export markets are already considerably diversified. And, because fruit is grown to highly precise market specifications (from size to plant health measures) it is not as

easy as switching destination. The reality is that expanding markets is a painstaking, long-term process, often taking more than a decade.

This is where the G20 summit comes in. With leaders and ministers from the world's most powerful economies gathering here, we have a unique and time-sensitive opportunity. Instead of focusing intensely on broad multilateral trade negotiations, our government should be using these meetings for targeted, bilateral discussions on the sidelines. Think of it as a series of "sidebar" trade talks — direct and limited to specific sectors that are most exposed to the current shocks. We could use the opportunity to propose packaged deals and limited offers that would fast-track market access.

If there is one lesson the world has learned since April's tariff disruptions, it is that trade deals can be made faster than anybody thought. We should embrace this new reality of swift deals and big announcements. It's an opportunity to bypass the slow grind of traditional agreements.

High potential for increased access

Many G20 members are citrus markets with high potential for increased access: Canada, China, India, Japan, South Korea and four EU countries. Some of these countries currently have considerable tariffs on South African citrus. Also, settling the issue of the EU's needlessly restrictive plant health measures regarding False Coddling Moth and Citrus Black Spot is just one market access opportunity worth mentioning.

However, deals should not just be a shift from the US to elsewhere. Because of new trees coming into fruit, South Africa has the opportunity to export an additional 100 million 15kg cartons of citrus by

2032, and this would create no fewer than 100,000 jobs. In a country struggling with endemic unemployment, we cannot afford to say no to this type of job growth. We need to retain all existing citrus markets — including the US — while expanding others. This demands careful and diplomatic action by our government.

Citrus and seasonal fresh produce hold a unique place in the current trade turmoil. It is not like a product produced in a factory. SA citrus growers do not threaten US growers or US jobs. In fact, because we are counter-seasonal, our produce sustains consumer interest when US local citrus is out of season.

It is interesting to note that Brazilian orange juice has been exempted from US tariffs. This is good news for citrus in general and hopefully points towards a precedent. High quality fresh citrus also plays an important role in keeping America healthy. These are all points South Africa can take up with the US, whether through direct negotiations or sidebar meetings with the US delegates who are attending the G20 meetings.

The world loves South Africa's citrus. The industry and the government have spent decades positioning our unique produce. Now is the time to use all negotiating tools at our disposal, of which G20 sidebar meetings could be one of the most successful, to translate our exports into new jobs and economic growth. **DM**

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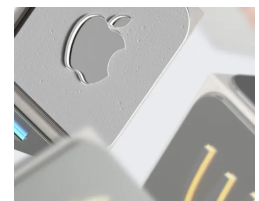
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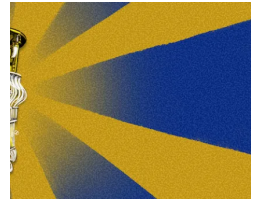


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