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US House committee set to vote on Agoa

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A key US congressional committee will consider a three-year extension on Wednesday of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa), the cornerstone of US trade policy towards sub-Saharan Africa.

But South Africa is increasingly likely to be left out amid escalating bilateral tensions with the Trump administration.

Reuters reports that the House Ways and Means Committee meeting marks the furthest Congress has advanced towards renewing the duty-free trade programme, which lapsed on September 30 after 25 years and supports hundreds of thousands of jobs across the continent.

However, US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer told reporters on Tuesday that, while the administration was open to a short one-year extension, South Africa presented a “unique problem” and could be excluded altogether.

“South Africa needs to reduce its tariffs and non-tariff barriers on US products if it wants the United States to lower the 30% duties we have

imposed on certain South African exports,” Greer said, reiterating long-standing US complaints about market access.

Pretoria has consistently rejected the Trump administration’s characterisation of the trade relationship as unbalanced, insisting Washington’s tariff calculations are based on inaccurate data.

The draft Agoa Extension Act currently before the committee contains no specific carve-out or special provision for South Africa. Lawmakers may still table amendments before the panel votes on whether to advance the Bill to the full House of Representatives.

In the Senate, a separate bipartisan bill introduced in October calls for a two-year Agoa renewal coupled with a formal review of US-South Africa bilateral relations, but the legislation has yet to be scheduled for committee consideration.

Relations between Washington and Pretoria have deteriorated sharply this year, fuelled by repeated public criticism from President Donald Trump of South Africa’s land-reform policies and laws aimed at addressing historical racial inequalities.

A spokesperson for South Africa’s Department of Trade, Industry and Competition said the country remained “fully committed to ensuring South Africa’s inclusion in any extension of Agoa”.

Since its inception in 2000, Agoa has generated more than 120 000 direct jobs across sub-Saharan Africa and supported over one million livelihoods through duty-free access to the US market, with non-oil exports under the programme rising from US\$1.4 billion in 2001 to \$10.3 billion in 2024.

For South Africa, Agoa has been a major export driver, enabling R68 billion worth of goods – led by vehicles, citrus, nuts, wine and steel – to enter the US duty-free in 2024 alone, supporting an estimated 70 000 direct and indirect jobs in the country’s economy.