South Africa's citrus conventional reefer programme to US winding down ahead of new tariffs

By Fred Meintjes | 18 July 2025

With just two weeks remaining before new US tariff rates come into effect, South African citrus exporters are concerned about the future of long-established supply relationships and rural jobs in the Western and Northern Cape

The seasonal South African citrus conventional reefer programme to the US, which has been a feature of the industry's exports for more than two decades, will wind down during the next two weeks.

It is expected that the sixth vessel of the programme, which normally delivers fruit throughout the season to US customers, will be on the water by next week.

Th[illegible]er vessel could sail to fulfil contractual agreements, but if new US tariffs – which come into effect on 1 August – are not reduced, this will arrive in the new tariff period.

Exporters point out that they also have a container export programme which is expected to continue if required to retain customer supply programmes.

It appears that most of the intended volumes which could have been shipped, will be arriving in the lower-duty period.

Exporters said they did the best they could to beat the tariff deadlines – with good volumes of high-quality fruit which US consumers are used to being shipped.

For the citrus exporters of the Western Cape there is perhaps little comfort in the extraordinary achievements to fulfil such a big part of their export programme before the end of July.

The conventional programme normally continues at the end of September when the last of the Midnight oranges are normally shipped.

This fruit will have to find other markets, as will the rest of the Mandarin crop, which will not be shipped by the end of July.

South African suppliers have built up supply relationships with specific US supply groups and retailers to pack specially branded fruit over the entire season.

They are deeply concerned about what the present tariff rates will do to the business, which supports a significant number of jobs in the rural communities of the Western and Northern Cape.

With the final tariff deadline now 14 days away, there is no indication that the South African government is making progress in its trade talks with the US to lower the incoming rates.

In South Africa, the government is facing increasing problems due to new policing scandals, which saw the minister of police and a senior police commissioner put on special leave.

While this is occupying the government's mind, growers wonder how much attention will be focused on their trade of citrus with the US.