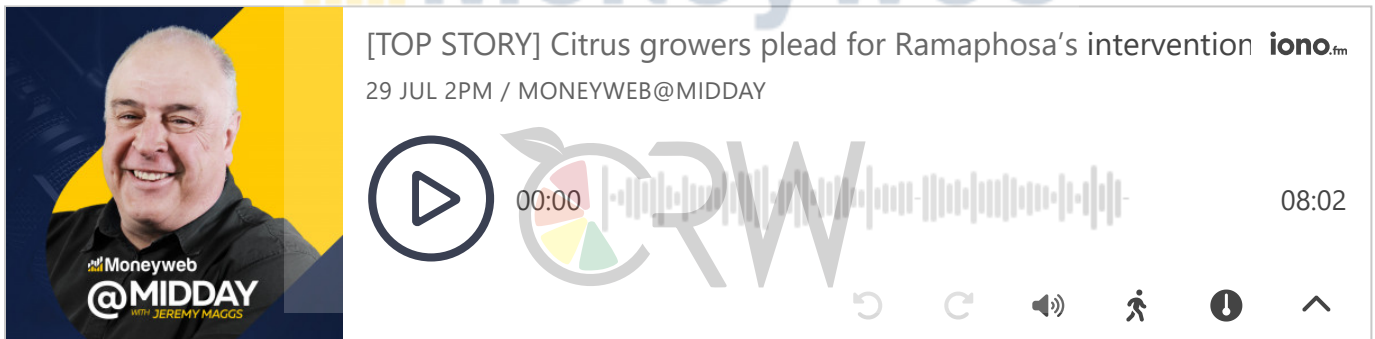


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Citrus growers plead for Ramaphosa's intervention before US tariff hits

'We provide employment, as citrus growers, in the Western Cape and the Northern Cape to 35 000 people. That's what we have to look at, all of us, government and the president also, to try and save those jobs,' says CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association.

By **Jeremy Maggs** · 29 Jul 2025 ⌚ 18:02



[TOP STORY] Citrus growers plead for Ramaphosa's intervention **iono.fm**
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JEREMY MAGGS: In just a few days, the United States is set to impose a 30% tariff on local citrus exports. That is a move that could leave hundreds of thousands of cartons of fruit unsold and thousands of rural jobs at risk. Now, the Citrus Growers' Association has made a direct appeal to President Ramaphosa to step in and negotiate a lifeline. But is Pretoria able to move fast enough to avoid a crisis? And what are the deeper structural issues at play?

I'm in conversation now with Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, who's the chief executive officer of the Citrus' Growers Association of Southern Africa. Dr Ntshabele, this is obviously a very grave situation. Firstly, have you had any formal response from the Presidency to your letter?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: Yes, we did receive a reply from the Presidency, which acknowledged receipt of our letter to the president. They also recommended that we also speak to the line function departments, which is the DDA [Department of Agriculture] and the dtic [Department of Trade and Industry].

relevant departments, namely the DAFF [Department of Agriculture] and the dtic [Department of Trade, Industry and Competition].

JEREMY MAGGS: So what progress have you made in that respect then?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: Well, we are in constant touch with both the dtic and the DOA. So the fact that we had escalated to the president, I think it also heightens a little bit on their side that we move promptly to trying to find a solution before 1 August.

JEREMY MAGGS: But dealing with those two entities says to me that the president isn't going to get directly involved, and that's what your organisation wants, isn't it?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: Not necessarily. I've always understood that the president would be leading, but he would also be delegating at certain points in terms of these discussions. That's what we are expecting, similar to almost what we all saw in May when he went to the White House.

JEREMY MAGGS: If no intervention comes by 1 August, and that is just around the corner, how much citrus is going to be lost, and what would the estimated financial hit to growers and the industry be as a whole?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: So it's difficult to quantify that at this point in time. What we can acknowledge is that we typically export about seven million cartons to the US. We've just gone through the peak or the middle of the season.

So we are in the process of trying to quantify. So there are a lot of moving parts. For example, some of the fruit might be going to other markets. So we're trying to follow up on what that number is in order to determine exactly what the scenarios might be in terms of the rest of the season.

JEREMY MAGGS: Dr Ntshabele, what is your constituency telling you right now? They must be increasingly worried about this.

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: That is precisely why we wrote the letter. We all are waiting with bated breath as to what happens this week. What would happen come 1 August. We really hope that the government will find a solution, negotiating a mutually beneficial trade pact between South Africa and the US.

We would like to remind listeners that our view of the world is that we actually do not compete with US citrus producers. We are actually helping increase citrus consumption in the US, in that we keep customers happy with our citrus when they are out of season, and then returning them to US producers when their season comes back online.

JEREMY MAGGS: It seems as though you're very close to the finish line here, at the eleventh hour. Are you satisfied that South Africa's trade diplomacy has adequately protected your sector, or is there a growing sense here that the government has dropped the ball?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: Look, we're not sure where we are. What we're worried about is that it

has come to this, that it's almost over the line. We're not sure which way it will go. But what is promising is that in the last five, six, seven days or so, there has been an increasing number of deals, as President Trump calls them. So we hope that ours becomes one of those that is finally announced.

JEREMY MAGGS: Well, your industry has said, and you're reiterating, that you are willing to negotiate. But are you getting any direct engagement from US trade representatives or officials, or do you think this is in danger of becoming a one-way appeal?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: We work closely with the government, and we hope that they also are using every avenue possible. We are lucky that we've got our own people on the ground on that side, who we also use to communicate our position, and therefore we have a sense that everything is possible at this point in time. Really, the clock is ticking and we're hoping that by midnight on the thirty-first of this month, something is on the table.

JEREMY MAGGS: Dr Ntshabele, you've also warned of job losses. Not the first time that this warning has been sounded. Are you able to give us any kind of number, either seasonal or permanent jobs which are on the line if this tariff goes ahead?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: The challenge, and maybe to paint it this way, is that if we lose this market, we lose half of this season that is currently under way. We don't know what will happen to the next season, Jeremy. And therein lies the risk.

We provide employment, as citrus growers, in the Western Cape and the Northern Cape to 35 000 people. That's what we have to look at, and all of us, government and the president also, to try and save those jobs.

JEREMY MAGGS: There is an argument that South Africa, some time back, should have diversified its export markets more aggressively. It obviously raises questions about why the industry is still so exposed to a single market like the United States. Is there some merit in that argument, do you think?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: I would say no. The one thing that people don't realise, Jeremy, is that we are the second biggest citrus exporter in the world after Spain. We ship our citrus to over 100 markets. So if you think about that, we are probably one of the most diversified industries in South Africa. So we already ship to over 100 markets, and we are currently talking to a number of markets.

For example, in April of this year, we were just in India knocking at the door to find new market opportunities in that space. We are talking to markets in Southeast Asia. So it's something that we do ourselves. We're well ahead in terms of diversifying market access.

JEREMY MAGGS: Which is good news, but how difficult or how realistic would it be at short notice to, say, reroute produce to India?

BOITSHOKO NTSHABELE: That's a tough one. We've always said that when citrus is grown, it's grown for specific markets in terms of the palate, what people like in terms of taste. There are

grown for specific markets in terms of the palate, what people like in terms of taste. There are also issues of health and safety in terms of MRLs [Maximum Residue Limit] and also

phytosanitary requirements of the recipient country. So those are some of the things that make it very difficult to pivot and suddenly shift from one market to the other.

Inherent in pivoting is also that you run the risk of oversupply in any one market. Therein lies the devil for the growers, in that once you oversupply a market, you get a drop in price and therefore you reduce profitability of your own growers.

JEREMY MAGGS: Well, there's no doubt this is a very serious situation and one that we will all be watching with a great deal of interest.

Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, thank you very much indeed, chief executive officer of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa.

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