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Jeremy's weekly wrap: Cannabis ban and ripple effects of US tariffs on SA's citrus industry

This week on Moneyweb@Midday, we examined the government ban on the sale and manufacturing of non-medicinal cannabis products, SA's strained diplomatic relations with the US, and how the citrus industry could be devasted by looming US tariffs.

By **Jeremy Maggs** · 28 Mar 2025 10:43

This week on Moneyweb@Midday I spent a lot of time discussing cannabis. Early in the week Tebogo Tlhopane, chair of the Cannabis Trade Association Africa, spoke about a controversial directive issued by Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi imposing a blanket ban on the manufacture and sale of non-medicinal cannabis products, including hemp-derived edibles and CBD-infused items.

Tlhopane explained that this sudden move — signed in January but only made public in March — caught the entire industry off guard, despite ongoing collaboration with government structures like the Cannabis Master Plan and related interdepartmental committees. He warned that the ban threatened to derail years of research and development, including nutrition initiatives with the CSIR, and would result in significant job losses

He stressed that the cannabis industry has followed regulatory processes and seeks to work with the government, not against it.

> **He argued that cannabis holds immense potential for economic growth and job creation**

Then in the wake of government's sudden U-turn on its ban of cannabis-infused food products, I spoke to Vanessa Jarvis-Findlay, founder of NEKED Cannabis Café who said the initial ban caused panic among consumers reliant on cannabis for medicinal use. Despite the regulatory confusion, she chose not to remove products from her shelves, continuing to operate under what she called "responsible adult use" standards— requiring proof of age and a consultation before purchase. She argued that the cannabis sector is being unfairly targeted while more

harmful substances like alcohol and tobacco remain freely accessible, and suggested powerful interests may be influencing government policy.

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And then from cannabis to diplomacy and I spoke to Tony Leon, former DA leader and South African ambassador to Argentina, about the diplomatic fallout following the expulsion of South Africa's ambassador to the US, Ebrahim Rasool. Leon described the expulsion as an "extreme measure", typically reserved for the gravest breaches in diplomacy, and said it marked one of the most serious breakdowns in South Africa-US relations in decades.

While Rasool's conduct may have triggered the action, Leon suggested the move was symptomatic of broader frustrations in Washington over South Africa's foreign policy posture, and a signal from the Trump administration of its growing impatience.

Leon reflected on what makes an effective ambassador in an era of "protocol-busting populism", arguing that ambassadors must function as salespeople for their countries — improving trade balances, strengthening bilateral ties, and enhancing national reputation. He criticised South Africa's diplomatic engagement in the US as overly focused on "struggle-era comfort zones" and called for a more pragmatic, interest-driven approach.

> **Asked whether he would accept a return to diplomacy, Leon said any consideration would depend on Pretoria's willingness to adjust its policies**

its policies.

[TOP STORY] Tony Leon on trade, Trump, and diplomacy: What he'd do as ambassador iono.fm
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And then a worried Gerrit van der Merwe, chair of the Citrus Growers Association, warned that looming US tariffs on South African citrus could devastate rural economies and cost up to 35 000 local jobs. The tariffs stem from escalating trade tensions, which van der Merwe described as particularly damaging for towns like Citrusdal, where citrus exports form the economic backbone. While the US only accounts for around 9% of South Africa's citrus exports, it represents the most profitable segment, cultivated to meet strict American standards. The knock-on effects, he said, will not only hurt South African farming communities but also disrupt long-standing supply chains in the US, where around 25 000 indirect jobs could be affected.

Van der Merwe expressed frustration with government indecision, asking for clarity on South Africa's long-term trade strategy — especially regarding the renewal of Agoa or a potential pivot to Eastern markets.

[TOP STORY] SA farmers fear the worst as US considers citrus tariffs iono.fm
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