South African citrus executive lifts the veil on tariff issues

By Fred Meintjes | 9 May 2025

South African government and growers can come together to overcome imminent challenges, says the CGA's Boitshoko Ntshabele

Working in tandem, the South African government and the country's citrus industry can identify and capitalise on new market opportunities, overcome trade barriers, and ensure that its fresh produce continues to meet international standards.

Boitshoko Ntshabele

This is the view of South African Citrus Association (CGA) chief executive Boitshoko Ntshabele, who recently concluded a series of meeting with growers across the country.

Digging deep, Dr Ntshabele quoted from the writings of Nelson Mandela as he looked to outline ways to address the tariff issues threatening South African fruit and other exports to the US.

“Nelson Mandela said If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart,” he said.

For South Africa the challenge is big, with its citrus export season having already started and the date of steeply increasing tariffs on the horizon in early July.

Most fruit on the water before the present pause in 30 per cent tariffs expires in early July, will still arrive under the 10 per cent tariff rate.

This will mean that South African growers will still get most of their fruit packed in June into the US before the deadline.

What happens from July onwards, no-one knows.

“In the past few weeks, I’ve had the privilege of traversing the citrus-producing regions of our country to meet citrus growers,” said Ntshabele. “It has been truly enlightening to meet men and women who dedicate their lives to cultivating the world-class fruit we export.”

He explained that he had encountered growers who were not only masters of their craft but also forward-thinkers, constantly seeking new ways to improve quality, adopt sustainable practices, and navigate the challenges of the global market.

From implementing cutting-edge irrigation techniques to pioneering biological pest control methods, their commitment to excellence was evident, Ntshabele said.

“Among our growers, market access remains a topic of serious interest, as it should,” he contined. ”The CGA remains focused on retaining existing markets and expanding into new territories.

”While there is tariff uncertainty regarding the US market, there is a clear argument to be made for the mutually beneficial nature of SA-US citrus exports.

”This is an argument representatives of the South African government is making to those in Washington DC,” Ntshabele commented.

The EU’s ”unscientific” CBS and FCM measures also remained a market access issue, currently being addressed through a World Trade Organisation dispute settlement process.

“There is immense promise with markets such as China, Japan and India, but in these markets unnecessary phytosanitary obstacles and high tariffs are holding back growth,” he pointed out.

“In early April the CGA travelled to India to address these issues, and we’ve just had a working visit to the Chinese Embassy, and more work is necessary to make these markets work for us.

“Expanding market access for export produce requires a concerted and collaborative effort between government and farmers,” Ntshabele outlined.

”Governments play a crucial role in negotiating favourable trade agreements, streamlining export processes, and providing essential infrastructure and support services.”

Farmers, on the other hand, brought invaluable expertise in production, quality control, and sustainable farming practices.

”Working in tandem, they can identify and capitalise on new market opportunities, overcome trade barriers, and ensure that South African produce continues to meet international standards.”

Increased citrus exports could drive inclusive growth by stimulating economic activity across the value chain, creating jobs in farming, processing, logistics, and related sectors.

”This expansion can also benefit historically disadvantaged communities through targeted development initiatives, skills training programs, and the empowerment of black farmers to continue to participate in and profit from the export market,” he concluded.