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GREEN SHOOT

SA citrus sector to smash export records this year as new orchards blossom



📷 The citrus industry's growth path is reaping hard currency earnings and creating jobs, providing hope for an economic landscape that has been shrouded in doom and gloom. (Photo: Waldo Swiegers / Bloomberg via Getty Images)

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South Africa's economy is barely growing, unemployment is sky high, and pessimism understandably abounds. But South Africa has competitive advantages on the global stage, including various regions that are conducive to citrus which is in high demand up north on an annual seasonal basis.

The citrus sector is injecting a shot of vitamin C into South Africa's ailing economy as it grows new orchards and smashes export records.

South Africa is the world's No 2 citrus exporter after Spain, and the industry's growth path is reaping hard currency earnings and creating jobs, providing a canopy of hope over an economic landscape that has been shrouded in doom and gloom.

According to estimates published on Friday, 3 October 2025, by the Citrus Growers Association (CGA), South Africa is on track to pack a record 202.2 million cartons of citrus for export in 2025. This is an 18% increase over the original estimate of 171.2 million, and 23% more than the 163.9 million packed in 2024 for shipping.

"The increase in production is largely due to the planting of new orchards by established growers. As an example of the growth, in 2020 we had 83,400 hectares of citrus in SA, and currently we have 101,600 ha," Citrus Growers Association CEO Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele told Daily Maverick.

That represents a 22% increase in hectares of citrus planted over the course of five years, underlining the point that the fruit is clearly profitable and worth capital expenditure for expansion.

"We have also had a fantastic year for quality, and the proportion of fruit available to export has been much higher than average," Ntshabele said.

Cyclical advantage

All of the major markets that our domestic citrus sector is targeting — such as the EU, US, China, India, South Korea and Japan — lie in the northern hemisphere, which gives South African producers a cyclical advantage as citrus is a seasonal winter crop.



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“Stronger demand for fruit due to a lower crop in the northern hemisphere at the beginning of our season contributed to significant volumes of especially lemons and oranges being moved earlier,” Ntshabele said.

Much of the industry is high tech, but simple measures such as netting — which reduces damage inflicted by birds and hail — is also boosting yields.

“Where fruit is grown under nets we are seeing better pack-out percentages — which means more fruit available for export,” Ntshabele said.



The use of netting changes the micro-climate beneath and reduces climate stress. Image: Schoonbee Landgoed

Other factors at play include “juicing prices”, which literally speak to the price obtained for squeezing juice from the fruit. It is revealing to note that in the US, the main tradable commodities market for citrus is “orange juice futures”, widely known as OJ futures.

“Last year, a very good local juicing price kept the export figures lower than expected. That is why this year’s increase might appear surprising. This year, though, exceptional demand in overseas markets for juicing oranges and juicing lemons (sent as whole fresh fruit for juicing) accounted for a large part of the export increases,” Ntshabele said.

Ed’s take

Labour-intensive industries geared to export are among the many shovels that South Africa’s economy needs to dig itself out of a deep rut. Much of the economic news out of South Africa is bleak. But there are green shoots and this one speaks to the resilience of South Africa’s farmers in the face of significant adversity. As a country, South Africa has advantages that it needs to grasp — and in this case also squeeze for the juice that lies within.

The sector does face numerous headwinds including the scatter-shot tariff policies of the Trump administration in the US, which have been taking aim at South Africa.

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Retailer measures, tariff tiffs

“High tariffs and unscientific phytosanitary measures are the two biggest trade barriers that must be addressed if we are to find a market for the projected increase in citrus over the next few years,” Ntshabele added.

“Unscientific phytosanitary measures” refer to private food safety standards imposed by global retailers that go above and beyond government regulations.

The World Citrus Organisation complained earlier this month (<https://worldcitrusorganisation.org/the-world-citrus-organisation-raises-concerns-about-private-food-safety-criteria-and-their-impact-on-the-citrus-sector/>) that “these measures contradict scientific evidence and undermine the role of and confidence in the rule of competent authorities”.

In many jurisdictions, retailers are allowed to set standards that exceed government regulations.

The organisation noted moves such as stricter maximum residue limits, which pertains to the amount of pesticide residue allowed to remain on food.

“The World Citrus Organisation urges retailers to refrain from setting private food safety criteria beyond legal frameworks,” it said. Among other things, it maintains that this undermines growers’ efforts to contend with the evolution of pests and disease as a result of climate change.

Beyond such international challenges, the sector has had to face domestic headwinds such as Transnet’s meltdown, which is clearly material to an export-oriented industry.

On this front at least, the ailing state-owned enterprise is now showing positive signs of a rebound as it recovers from years of mismanagement, malfeasance and underinvestment.

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Water is another issue as citrus is H₂O intensive — there’s a reason why so much juice comes from the fruit. All of South Africa’s commercial citrus production is under irrigation, and climate change and fouled water systems linked to failing infrastructure are mounting concerns.

And like the wider farming sector, there remain jitters about evolving government policy and private property rights in a political economy that still carries the deep scars of apartheid inequality.

The main goal of the South African citrus industry is outlined in its “Vision 260”, which aims to export 260 million 15kg cartons by 2032. The industry maintains this has the potential to create 100,000 new jobs as citrus farming is labour as well as water and capital intensive.

South Africa’s economy is barely growing, unemployment is sky high, and pessimism understandably abounds. But South Africa has competitive advantages on the global stage including various regions that are conducive to the production of citrus, which is in high and growing demand up north on an annual seasonal basis.

It’s low-hanging fruit that needs to be cultivated. **DM**

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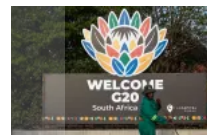
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Maybe this ANC controlled government should look beyond the raft of laws and rules governing the private sector across all platforms. We could surpass Spain as the world's No. 1 citrus producer and, instead of the semi hysterical shouting about job creation by Ramaphosa, do something positive like reduce our monumentally over populated parliamentary and use the money to teach and finance black farmers in establishing and running productive farms. More jobs, more foreign income.

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