

Despite US tariffs, South Africa's agricultural exports soar

Recent trade data and industry insights suggest that South Africa's agricultural sector remains resilient despite new US tariffs, with diversification into other markets helping to offset potential risks.



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"While the US tariffs present hurdles for a few niche agri sectors, we are seeing data trends that support a counter-narrative: The disruption is accelerating a shift towards new opportunities," say Sean Walsh, CEO of KAL Group, a JSE-listed South African agricultural, fuel and convenience retail

"Trade flows are starting to realign, and long-planned diversification into Asia, Africa and Europe is gaining momentum, supported by better logistics and stronger trade partnerships."

Limited US exposure in agricultural exports

"While it is true that the US is one of SA's most important trading partners on the whole, when it comes to agriculture, the US is not dominant," says Walsh.

According to a recent Agbiz report, SADC markets accounted for roughly 39% of South Africa's agricultural exports in the first quarter of 2025, followed by the European Union (25%), with small

shares going to the United Kingdom, China, and other African markets.

The United States made up only 4–6.5% of agricultural exports in recent years.

Citrus sector still on track for record season

Citrus has been central to the tariff debate, but Walsh says exports are set for a record year in 2025 with limited exposure to the US. Around 4% of South Africa's citrus exports went to the US in 2024 totalling 6.58 million cartons. Within the US market for Southern Hemisphere citrus, South Africa has a 13.9% share, behind Chile, Peru, and Argentina.

"The citrus industry is having an unbelievable year, driven both by exceptional yields, improved quality and export growth," says Walsh, adding that most shipments took place before the 30% US tariff took effect.

Forecasts point to 180 million 15 kg cartons for 2025 – up from 164.6 million in 2024. Walsh notes this will positively affect Agrimark sales, given its large role in supplying packaging material to the export industry.

"The real effects are expected to become visible from the 2026 season onwards," says Walsh. "Importers will naturally compare tariffs across suppliers, and while some South American and EU competitors may look more attractive in the US, that creates openings for South Africa in other markets currently served by those suppliers."

Broader diversification gains momentum

Walsh notes that US exposure is concentrated in a handful of high-value commodities such as macadamias, raisins, fruit juice, ostrich leather and some citrus lines, while most other products have minimal US dependence.

"Macadamia producers are already exploring alternative markets such as India, recognising that global demand remains strong," he adds.

"South Africa's trade strategy increasingly emphasises expanding market access in emerging regions," says Walsh. "Asia represents a rapidly expanding opportunity. Citrus exports to Vietnam, avocado to China, Japan and India, and premium wine to Asian markets, combined with logistics upgrades, are already reshaping South Africa's trade profile."

Trade efforts also extend to Turkey and Switzerland, while partnerships under the AfCFTA and new arrangements with India and the UK are expected to deepen market access.

Sector repositioning, not retreating

"Differences in US tariffs between suppliers could shift trade patterns in the Southern Hemisphere that may work in South Africa's favour," Walsh concludes.

"When it comes to the agricultural sector, the US is not as dominant for our exports as the EU, UK, China and Africa. For most producers, the US is simply one of several markets – not the sole focus. This reflects a sector that is strategically repositioning rather than one in decline."

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