

The Farmers' Chronicles

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A New Way Forward: A Breakthrough for South Africa's Citrus Exports to China.

For citrus growers who face mounting input costs, tight profit margins and intensifying global competition, gaining access to the right market can determine whether their season succeeds or fails. The latest trade deal between South Africa and China could prove a game changer for local growers.

On 10 April 2026, Minister of Agriculture John Steenhuisen and Chinese Ambassador Wu Peng signed the Supplementary Phytosanitary Requirements for the export of South African citrus to China at the Chinese Embassy in Pretoria. While this marked an important achievement in terms of a formal agreement, what was also noteworthy was the significance

of the agreement as evidence of an emerging partnership between the two countries and its potential to enhance the speed, cost and competitiveness of exporting goods from South Africa to China. Added to China's zero-tariff policy, this deal has opened the door further for South African agricultural products to one of the world's fastest growing markets.

At the core of this agreement are changes to the cold treatment protocols required to ensure that all citrus fruit exported from South Africa do not carry pests. Until recently, complying with these requirements had increased costs associated with handling and processing fruit, extended time spent handling



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fruit and created additional logistical issues for growers. The revised protocols introduce flexibility regarding treatment options. Therefore, for growers, there is a lower risk of delays experienced when harvesting fruit during periods of peak production, a better ability to manage the timeline for exporting fruit and lower costs related to managing compliance and handling.

Similarly, for packhouse and export companies, it reduces operational complications and increases efficiencies, and for buyers in China, they experience a constant supply of high-quality products. In essence, this agreement is designed to keep high-quality fruit moving efficiently along the value chain from orchard to shelf.

Another major advantage offered by the relationship is China's zero-tariff policy on South African products. Tariffs typically create a substantial barrier-to-entry in a global export market where other competing suppliers are vying for market share. When tariffs exist, they usually determine prices and profitability, and consequently access to markets. By eliminating tariffs as a barrier to entry, South African citrus exporters gain a distinct competitive advantage. They can offer more competitive pricing in China, improve profit margins, and present a more attractive product option to importers and retailers. This represents both a policy-based benefit and a strategic advantage that places South Africa

ahead of other competing suppliers that continue to face tariff barriers to entry. China is increasingly becoming a primary market for South African citrus. In 2025, exports to China and Hong Kong totalled approximately 11,5 million cartons (approximately 6% of total citrus exports). Expectations suggest that this percentage will grow. Growing demand from China's expanding middle class, coupled with preferences for fresh and high-quality produce, are driving the demand. From a farmer's perspective, this is a market that values consistency, reliability and scale.

Given the enhanced conditions for export now available in South Africa, an opportunity exists to not only maintain current levels of participation, but to expand them. This agreement forms part of a larger trend of increasing agricultural trade between South Africa and China. Some of the recent successes include increased access for stone fruit varieties such as apricots, peaches, nectarines, plums and prunes.

Collectively, each of these achievements provides a solid base for long-term expansion. According to Minister Steenhuisen, these agreements are based upon mutual trust and sustained cooperation. Such trust facilitates negotiation, resolves challenges more effectively and unlocks new opportunities for South African producers. South Africa's continued commitment to supporting the "One-China" policy will remain an essential factor in providing stability to this relationship.



For growers and exporters, this translates into reliable trade conditions, swift dispute resolution processes surrounding export-related issues, and confidence to invest and expand. Stability in trade relations is often an underestimated driver of sustainable success in export-oriented agriculture.

Southern Africa's citrus industry is one of its strongest performing agricultural sectors. In 2025, Southern Africa exported approximately 204 million cartons of citrus with approximately 193 million cartons coming from South Africa.

Citrus export earnings have now exceeded \$2,4 billion, reaching an estimated US\$2,47 billion. Beyond these numbers, however, the real economic benefits to rural communities are being realised by this sector. Approximately 140,000 people are directly employed on farms and in packhouses in addition to many others working in logistics, transportation and export service industries. Each increase in export activity contributes positively to individual livelihoods, sustains business activities, and maintains the vitality of rural economies.

Going forward, continued cooperation between government agencies and organisations such as the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa will be pivotal. These types of partnerships assist in ensuring that export standards are maintained, opportunities are maximised, and farmers receive support as they expand their production volumes to satisfy international demands.

