Fruit SA newsletter: May–June ’26

CEO’s note

In South Africa, the business of exporting fruit goes back more than a century.

On 13 January 1892, the first consignment of fruit left South African shores for export to the UK. It compromised 14 cases of South African peaches transported on the Drummond Castle.

The intellectual capital and institutional knowledge that the industry has amassed since then is vast and can and should continue to be put to good use. This includes integration of and knowledge transfer to the youth – especially pertinent in the vein of Youth Day this month.

Speaking of the youth, Stats SA continues to report a grim statistical context: its Q1 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) reports 4.7 million members of the 15–34 population demographic as unemployed and the remaining 10.6 million being outside the labour force. Collectively, this amounts to 36.25% of South Africa’s working-age population.

On a positive note, National Agriculture Minister John Steenhuisen has confirmed a 11% year-on-year increase in South African agricultural exports in Q1 of 2026, with horticultural products being a meaningful contributor.

And the fruit industry continues to celebrate the historic achievement of the citrus industry in accelerating past Spain to clinch the number one spot as the largest global citrus exporter. We also applaud the table-grape industry for export of 78.3 million cartons (4.5 kg equivalent) in the 2025/6 season. And the stone-fruit industry closed the season with 114 079 exported tonnes (up from 113 701 in the 2024/5 season). This is commendable, particularly considering the difficulties brought by the most recent season.

And in the devastating aftermath of cold fronts and extreme weather in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces, industry players continue to work with provincial governments in both provinces to provide growers with the necessary support.

Market access

“The more things change, the more they stay the same”

This quote, accredited to critic Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, rings true for the modern-day South African fruit industry.

The industry is valued at R86 billion and exports more than 60% of its fruit. But it has taken more than a century to get here. For perspective, in 2002/3, the industry was valued at only R8 845 million.

Since the first shipment of South African fruit, the local fruit industry has ebbed and flowed as role-players navigated a mix of challenges, victories and lessons, especially after deregulation of the South African fruit sector in 1997.

Then, in June 2004, a carefully selected group of stakeholders and industry players convened to formulate a strategy to map the future of the South African fruit industry.

Market access being one of the key focus areas in the plan, it inspires hope to see how industry efforts have continued to pay off since. In **Figure 1**, for example, from 2013–2024, the industry exported a total of 37 144 274 tonnes of fruit, with the EU and Russia combined absorbing the lion’s share of 14 788 346 tonnes (39% of overall exports).

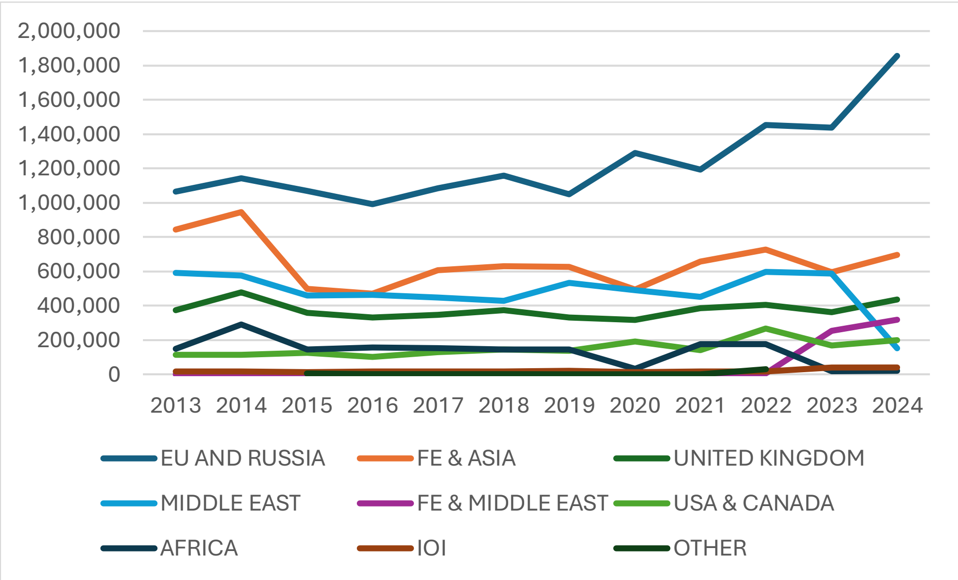

Figure 1: South African fruit exports per market segment (tonnes), 2013–2024

And southern hemisphere fresh fruit production volumes for 2012–2024 (excl. litchis) feature Brazil as leading (see **Figure 2**). Yet, South Africa is the leading exporter (by volume) in the region, with the country's export-oriented nature (as opposed to Brazil's local-market focus) being the offsetting factor.

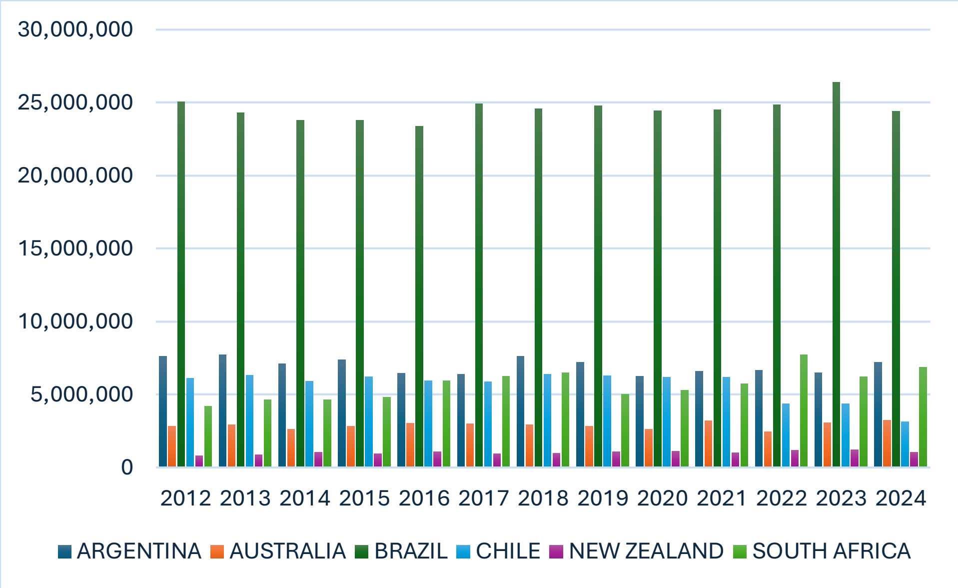

Figure 2: Southern hemisphere production volumes by country (tonnes), 2013 - 2024

Looking back now, it is uncanny how many of the challenges identified in 2004 are echoed today. These include the ongoing integration and transformation of the global value chain, evolving consumer trends, and intensifying competition from other southern hemisphere exporting countries. Domestic hurdles include rising input costs, increased legislation, and volatility in the price of exports.

So, while the nuances of industry challenges may have changed over the decades, they've remained fundamentally the same. This presents a major benefit for the industry to make better use of the knowledge it already has.

The China zero-tariff policy: significant spin-offs for South African apple and pear exports

The diversification strategy for fruit exports that formed part of the referenced industry strategy formulated in 2004, mainly targeted countries in Asia.

If progress in this regard had stalled, it would not have been possible to maximise current opportunities such as the China-Africa Economic Partnership Agreement, which qualifies South Africa for the related zero-tariff policy.

In 2025, South Africa exported 1 million boxes of apples to China, securing its position as China's second-largest apple supplier.

Commenting during a recent South African pome-fruit carnival in China, Shanghai Shengguo confirmed having seen a significant volume increase this year. Shengguo is a long-term importer of South African apples and pears.

South African pome-fruit carnival in China. Picture supplied by Produce Report

Joining the event virtually, Jacques du Preez, Hortgro General Manager: Trade and Markets, expressed hope for a more robust presence in the Chinese market regarding export volumes and varietal diversity. Read the related article [here].

Transformation

A "mindset for transformation"

The fundamental change that is implied in the word, "transformation", is often not visible in practice.

During strategic discussions in 2004, industry players already saw the importance of adopting and harnessing a "mindset for transformation". This transformative approach has guided industry initiatives effectively and has certainly borne tangible fruit, although a lot remains to be done.

In the South African fruit industry, it is important that stakeholders – especially government – are able to see measurable progress in related industry output. This is in the best interest of the beneficiaries who must be equipped with the requisite tools to proficiently run their enterprises, for ultimate widespread industry growth.

But with a focus area like transformation, agility and periodic reviews are critical. Hence, the previous edition referenced a recent transformation strategic review session that has kick-started a regroup to assess whether current transformation targets still prove to be realistic, evidence-based, and aligned with the modern-day operational and financial realities of the fruit industry.

The landscape may have changed since 2004, but the needs of the black participants have fundamentally remained the same – for targeted structural, financial, and skills support.

Acknowledged progress

It is encouraging to note the efforts of the industry in helping to address transformation challenges.

Members of Fruit SA attended the SA Subtropical Growers' Association (Subtrop) Transformation Summit on 22 May 2026. There, they observed notable progress from ongoing transformation initiatives.

A standout moment at this event came from the Vhembe growers, who shared how Subtrop's support has transformed their enterprises. Through the Market Readiness Programme, these growers are preparing to supply formal South African markets, with ambitions to expand into exports. Their testimonies highlighted how transformation initiatives have turned their businesses into profitable ventures.

The summit also featured speakers and stakeholders presenting opportunities in finance, markets and agro-processing. These reinforced the value of partnerships in driving meaningful change. As a voluntary, levy-funded entity, the subtropical industry continues to prove that even modest contributions – when combined with focused collaboration – can deliver significant impact.

YES@Tuks Career Connect

On 16 April 2026, Fruit SA honoured an invitation from the Young Economists Society (YES@Tuks), to engage with students from the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty who aspire to qualify as economists and agricultural economists.

The event provided a valuable platform to highlight the diverse opportunities available within the fruit industry for graduates, spanning both primary and secondary agriculture.

Through a targeted presentation, Fruit SA showcased bursary programmes, graduate placements, and broader industry offerings, emphasising the pathways available for young professionals to build fulfilling careers.

Such engagements highlight industry-specific career opportunities and play a vital role in attracting new talent and inspiring the next generation to contribute meaningfully to the sector's growth and transformation.

Selected Fruit SA event attendance, in pictures

AgBiz Congress, 3–5 June:
Left: Nomonde Ntloko (left) and Fhumulani Ratshitanga (both Fruit SA), with Wandile Sihlobo (AgBiz Chief Economist and SA Presidential Envoy on Agriculture and Land). **Right:** Fruit SA with DoA DG Mooketsa Ramasodi (left) and Minister John Steenhuisen.

Berries ZA Trade Symposium, 28–29 May: Elzette Schutte (Berries ZA), Elelwani Mugabi (DoA) and Sahabne Ullah (Fruit SA)

SATI AGM, 28 May: André Jacobs (left), and Francois Rossouw Jnr. and Snr. with Mecia Petersen (middle, SATI), Simóhn Engelbrecht (Agri SA) and Fhumulani Ratshitanga (Fruit SA). Image supplied by SATI.

Subtrop Transformation Summit, 21 May:
Thomas Sebata (Fruit SA), Maremo Mphahlele (NAMC) and Nomonde Ntloko (Fruit SA). Image supplied by Subtrop.

YES@TUKS Career Connect Day, 16 April
Left: University of Pretoria student Oratile Bapela, and Nomonde Ntloko (Fruit SA). Image supplied by the Young Economists Society (YES@Tuks).