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South African Cherries Gain Market Access to China, Opening a New Chapter for a Fast-Growing Industry

Minister of Agriculture, Mr Willie Aucamp and Minister Sun Meijun of the General Administration of Customs of China (GACC) signing the protocol this morning

Paarl, South Africa — South Africa's cherry industry has secured market access to China, giving local growers a foothold in the world's largest cherry-importing market at precisely the moment the industry has the volumes to make use of it. The announcement comes as South

African cherry production has climbed 54% over the past two seasons, from 3,300 tonnes in 2024/25 to a projected 5,100 tonnes in 2025/26.

South Africa's cherry footprint has grown from 262 hectares in 2016 to 802 hectares today, spread across 34 growers and 45 farming units, with most concentrated in the Western Cape's Ceres region. Roughly 30% of these orchards are not yet in full production, meaning there is considerable room for growth, as younger plantings mature. Access to China arrives just as the industry's newer plantings — including varieties such as Cheery Nebula™ and Cheery Cupid™ — begin bearing fruit at scale.

Why China

China's cherry import market is enormous — nearly 590 000 tonnes in 2025 — yet it relies overwhelmingly on a single supplier. Chile currently accounts for more than 95% of China's cherry imports, with the United States, Canada, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand splitting the remainder. That concentration leaves China's retailers and consumers exposed to any disruption in Chilean supply and gives a new, quality-focused origin such as South Africa a genuine opening.

South Africa's cherry harvest follows a Southern Hemisphere export calendar similar to Chile’s, but it has a global competitive advantage: it can export cherries to China three weeks before Chile can enter the market.

The industry's export volumes have historically been a fraction of those of its neighbours — South Africa held just a 0.27% share of Southern Hemisphere cherry exports in 2025/26, against a combined market of over 115 million equivalent cartons dominated by Chile. Globally, South Africa ranks 23rd among cherry exporters, with roughly 0.18% of world exports, compared with Chile's 60% and Hong Kong's re-export hub at 18%.

South Africa has already demonstrated it can win market share in Asia. The region is the industry's strategic growth market: cherry exports to Asia rose 344% year on year, with Singapore, Cambodia and Malaysia together accounting for 69% of the industry's Asian exports. While South Africa’s exports to all major markets increased in volume last season, the Far East & Asia market is the only export market where South Africa’s percentage share of total cherry exports increased from the 2024/25 season, while the UK and Middle East shares were declining – indicating a shift away from the traditional markets to the Far East & Asia.

What China access means for growers

Direct access to China gives South African exporters a market to add to the Asian growth story, at a time when the industry's export base — 488 000 equivalent cartons in 2025/26, up 111% year-on-year — is expanding fast enough to support new destinations without cannibalising existing ones.

Competition will be intense. Chile's cherry plantings have grown from 41 000 hectares in 2018 to 78 000 hectares in 2025, nearly 100 times the South African footprint, with 39.5% of their orchards still in their formation years (0-4 years old). Chile’s shipments to China alone last season totalled 98,762,000 equivalent cartons. Argentina, though a smaller player, has also established a presence in Asia. South African growers will therefore initially enter as a minor supplier by volume.

But the industry's growth trajectory — production up 54% over two years, exports up 111% in a single season, and 30% of orchards still not at full production — suggests a supply base with genuine room to scale into a market of China's size, which over time will reduce China's overwhelming reliance on one supplier.

About Hortgro

Hortgro represents the South African deciduous fruit industry, supporting growers of pome and stone fruit — including cherries — through research, market development and industry information services.

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Source: https://www.cherries.org.za/presentations-at-agm/

Caption: Mr Willie Aucamp, South African Minister of Agriculture, and Mr Jacques du Preez, Hortgro CEO, at the signing ceremony in Beijing this morning