



Quarterly Trade Update

First Quarter of 2026

This publication provides a quarterly synopsis of trade-related matters in the South African agricultural sector



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INSIGHT

The South African agricultural sector began 2026 with remarkable resilience, achieving a record-breaking trade surplus of approximately **R33 billion** in the first quarter. While the broader national economy faced global volatility, agricultural exports surged to **R67 billion** – a Q1 record. However, biosecurity challenges are undermining the export growth potential.

Total South African trade

South Africa's total trade performance between Q1 2021 and Q1 2026 was characterised by a steady expansion in export values, which rose from approximately R400 billion to a peak of over R500 billion in nominal terms. This growth reflects a resilient export sector that maintained an upward trajectory despite global economic turbulence. While exports showed consistent strength, imports were volatile. They surged sharply between 2021 and 2023, then stabilised, and eventually declined to approximately R450 billion by the start of 2026.

As a result, the trade surplus fluctuated with the greatest pressure in Q1 2023 and 2024, when the gap between exports and imports narrowed to around zero. However, in the subsequent years, there was a marked recovery in the trade balance as export growth outpaced import costs.

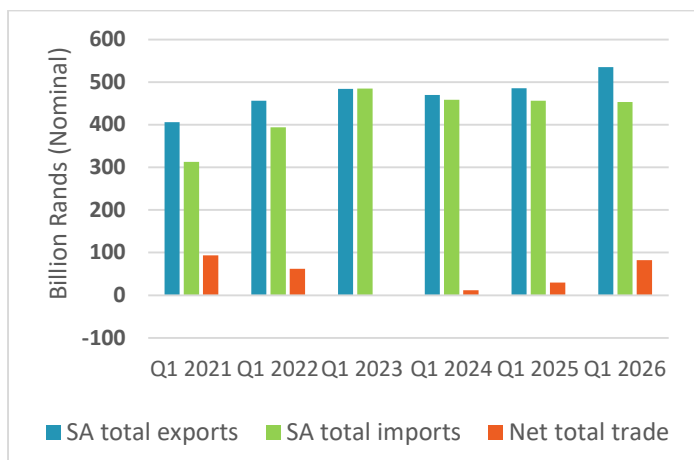


Figure 1: South Africa's total trade 2021Q1 – 2026Q1

Source: ITC, 2026

The trade surplus in Q1 2026 widened markedly, reaching its highest level since the COVID-19 pandemic years. This reinstated the country's net exporter status.

Trade in the South African agricultural sector

South Africa's agricultural sector demonstrated robust export growth between Q1 2021 and Q1 2026, with nominal values rising steadily from approximately R47 billion to a peak of R67 billion (Figure 2). This consistent upward trajectory highlights the increasing global reach and productivity of the nation's agricultural exports over the five-year period from a 2021 Q1 base. The steady climb in export value illustrates the sector's competitiveness in international markets. This supports a

sustainable growth trajectory and highlights the sector's resilience despite adverse weather conditions, deteriorating infrastructure and economic challenges.

While agricultural imports also increased since 2021, they exhibited more variability, peaking at approximately R38 billion in 2025 before dropping slightly to R34 billion in the first quarter of 2026, driven by changes in commodity prices and demand for imported goods to supplement local shortages.

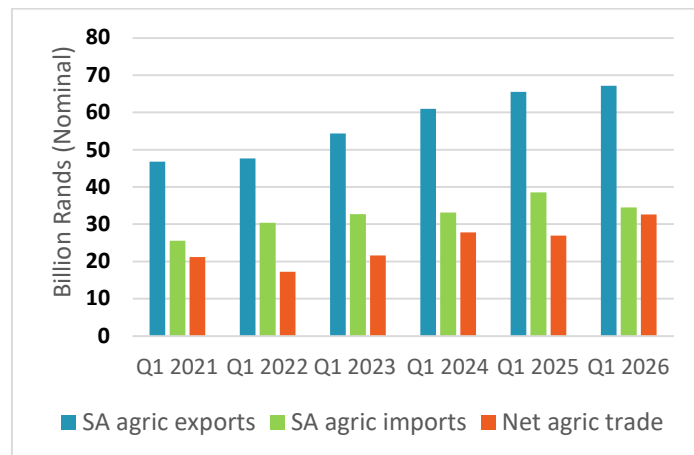


Figure 2: South Africa's 2021Q1 – 2026Q1 agricultural trade

Source: ITC, 2026

In the first quarter of 2026, the sectoral surplus grew due to consistent export growth, which has consistently outpaced the more volatile imports. The trade surplus has nearly doubled since its 2022 low. It reached a high of approximately R33 billion, underscoring the sector's critical role as a net foreign-exchange earner.

Consolidation of agricultural trade with selected partners

South Africa's trade performance in the first quarter of 2026 highlights a resilient export sector anchored by regional stability and strengthening ties with Europe.

Agricultural imports contracted notably across several major partners, suggesting fluctuations in commodity prices, tighter foreign expenditure and/or shifts in domestic demand. The most dramatic decline was observed in trade with the United States, where imports plummeted from R1.8 billion in 2025 Q1 to just R0.6 billion in 2026 Q1 (Figure 3). This is attributed to the deterioration of trade and diplomatic relations between the two countries in recent times. Imports from other regions decreased, with Thailand (27%), China (13%), and Indonesia (6%) among the top five suppliers of agricultural products to South Africa. The two main products from these countries are palm oil and rice. The European Union (EU) and SADC regions remained the most stable sources of agricultural goods. The EU slightly increased its supply to R9 billion, and SADC held steady at R5.5 billion.

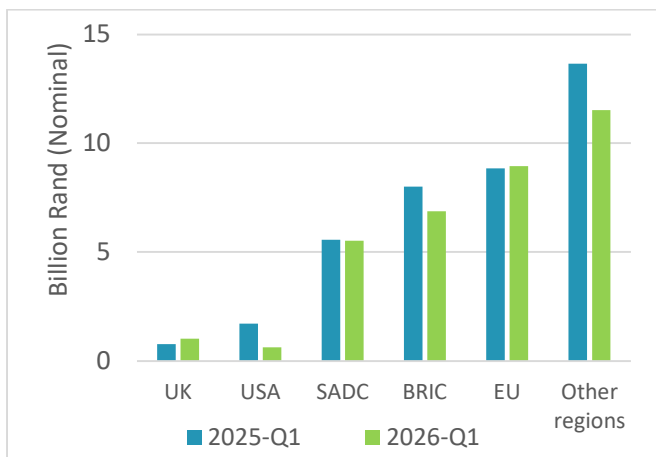


Figure 3: South Africa's agricultural imports (R34 bn) from selected partners in 2025Q1 and 2026Q1

Source: ITC, 2026

On the export side, the SADC region remains the primary destination for South African goods. It maintained a consistent export value of R26 billion, while the EU emerged as an important growth driver, with exports rising to nearly R19 billion (Figure 4). This upward trajectory in exports, which also saw modest gains in the UK and BRIC markets, suggests successful diversification of trade destinations helped bolster the country's nominal revenue despite global economic fluctuations.

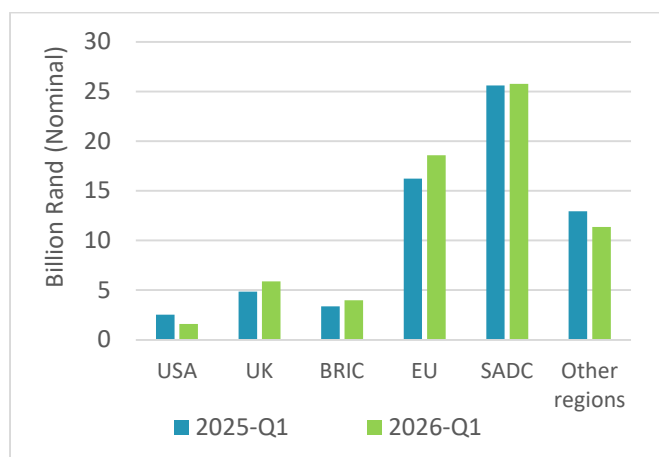


Figure 4: South Africa's agricultural exports (R67 bn) to selected partners in 2025Q1 and 2026Q1

Source: ITC, 2026

Overall, the first quarter shows a robust trade surplus, particularly with the SADC and EU regions, where export values significantly outweigh import values. While traditional trade with the United States has seen a sharp downturn in both directions. South Africa offset the declines by deepening trade by anchoring agreements with regional African markets and the EU. This shift reflects a strategic realignment of trade priorities, prioritising stable regional partnerships and growing European demand to maintain a healthy overall trade balance for the remainder of 2026.

Disaggregated agricultural commodity trade performance by value and growth

The trade data for the first quarter of 2026 show a strong performance in South Africa's agricultural exports, led primarily by the edible fruit and nuts sector, which grew 13.7% to a value of R26.12 billion (See Table 1) year-on-year. Port delays, driven by the worst weather in Cape Town port in November and December of 2025, likely resulted in a spillover of product shipments into January. Sugar products were the fastest-growing export category, with a 54.7% increase, driven by rising exports to Namibia, Spain and Portugal, while other sectors such as oilseeds and food preparations also saw steady gains. However, this growth was offset by a sharp 28.5% decline in cereal exports despite the increase in regional demand for maize (+10%). Lower commodity prices in the first quarter of 2026 compared to the same period in 2025 drove the decline in export value, as local stock levels and global market dynamics affected export prices from South Africa.

The import side was marked by a significant contraction in staples, most notably a 36.2% decrease in cereal imports. Staples fell from R7.52 billion in Q1 of 2025 to R4.80 billion in Q1 of 2026, led by a 25% decline in rice imports. While the quantity imported increased, the value of imports decreased because South Africa was able to purchase rice in international markets at lower prices than a year ago. This was done by shifting demand toward semi-processed rice (HS 100630) and converting it to a finished product at home. This supports an increase in consumer demand among lower-income consumers amid tighter budgets and higher meat prices.

Conversely, meat imports surged by 44.6%, representing the highest growth among imported goods. The increase in meat imports was driven by poultry and pork, which accounted for 64% and 15% of total meat imports, respectively. Domestic Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreaks contributed to the surge in imports to supplement shortages and provide consumers with more cost-effective alternatives as red meat prices reached record highs. In addition, the domestic pork industry has been struggling with production deficits due to African Swine Fever (ASF).

Imports of high-value items (e.g., wine (-73%), beer (-11%), and whiskies (-7%), as well as processed produce) saw double-digit declines in import value. The overall trend reflects a volatile period for South African agricultural trade, characterised by a heavy reliance on fruit exports and a notable reduction in the value of imported grains.

Table 1: Value and growth of the top 10 South African agricultural trade commodities: 2025Q1 vs. 2026Q1

Trade flow	Products	Q1 2025 (Rand bn)	Q1 2026 (Rand bn)	Percentage Change
Exports	Edible fruit and nuts	22,97	26,12	13.7%
	Beverages	6,34	6,95	9.6%
	Cereals	5,62	4,02	-28.5%
	Miscellaneous	3,04	3,24	6.6%
	Processed fruit & veg	3,51	2,96	-15.5%
	Sugar products	1,46	2,27	54.7%
	Fish products	2,35	2,54	7.8%
	Wool	1,97	1,80	-8.4%
	Oilseeds	1,79	2,05	14.6%
	Food preparations	1,63	1,79	10.2%
Imports	Animal & veg oils	3,59	3,73	4.0%
	Cereals	7,52	4,80	-36.2%
	Beverages	3,12	2,47	-21.0%
	Sugar products	2,37	2,75	16.1%
	Meat products	1,52	2,20	44.6%
	Miscellaneous	2,00	1,99	-0.4%
	Processed fruit & veg	1,74	1,27	-26.9%
	Cocoa	1,08	1,10	1.9%
	Articles of leather	1,10	1,10	-0.1%
	Tobacco	1,13	1,24	10.2%

Overall, **Table 1** shows that the horticultural sub-sector continues to drive South Africa’s agricultural exports.

IN CONCLUSION

The first quarter of 2026 has solidified South Africa’s position as a resilient net exporter. The agricultural sector recorded a trade surplus of R33 billion, accounting for 40% of the total trade surplus in the quarter. This performance marks a significant recovery from the narrower margins seen in 2023 and 2024. This signals, hopefully, a robust start to the year despite global economic volatility.

Strategic trade realignment: A defining theme of the first quarter is a shift in trade partnerships. Trade with the United States was terrible, with imports plummeting by over 60%. South Africa successfully pivoted toward more stable regional and international markets. The **SADC region** remains the cornerstone of South African exports (R26 billion), while the **European Union** has emerged as a vital growth driver (R19 billion). This consolidation and diversification have effectively buffered the sector against diplomatic and trade tensions elsewhere (for now, as the impact of the conflict in the Middle East is likely to start showing in Q2).

Commodity dynamics

- **Horticultural dominance:** The agricultural sector’s growth continues to be anchored by edible fruits and nuts, which saw a 13.7% increase. This may have been boosted by export volumes that could not be shipped in the previous quarter due to port challenges.
- **Shifting import expenditure:** There was a notable contraction in the value of staple imports, particularly cereals, which fell by 36%, led by declines in rice from Asian countries, as commodity prices decreased.
- **Weak biosecurity measures starting to bite:** a 44.6% surge in meat imports illustrates the inability to control diseases which disrupt local supply, leading to the need to source various types of meat elsewhere.

Looking ahead: As the sector heads into the remainder of 2026, its growth depends on maintaining the momentum in the horticultural sub-sector and deepening ties within African and European markets, while seeking to create opportunities in other regions. This ambition must be accompanied by the urgent addressing of the biosecurity lapses that threaten local production, as market access has already been secured through prior trade agreements. By prioritising these stable regional partnerships and anchoring trade agreements, South Africa is well-positioned to maintain a growing trade balance and navigate the complexities of the global marketplace.

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