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South Africa opens China gateway for stone fruit exports in landmark zero-tariff breakthrough

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South Africa has officially begun exporting stone fruits to China, launching a new phase in its agricultural trade strategy after the implementation of a zero-tariff agreement covering 53 African countries. The first consignment of plums has already been shipped, marking a significant breakthrough for the countryâ??s horticulture sector and establishing direct access to one of the worldâ??s largest and fastest-growing consumer markets.

The initial exports include two premium plum varieties, *African Delight* and *Ruby Star*, which entered the Chinese market following the conclusion of a bilateral trade protocol. A pilot shipment of around 20,000 plums was dispatched toward the end of the harvest season, serving as an early market test that has reportedly received positive feedback from Chinese buyers, setting a strong foundation for scaled-up exports in the next production cycle.

Industry stakeholders expect the agreement to unlock broader opportunities across South Africaâ??s stone fruit category, with peaches, nectarines, apricots, and prunes also expected to be exported as production volumes increase in the coming season. The development is being viewed as a structural shift for the sector, enabling long-term diversification away from traditional export markets such as the European Union and the United Kingdom while significantly expanding exposure to Asian demand.

Economists and agricultural officials describe the breakthrough as a pivotal moment for the industry, with Chinaâ??s large import appetite offering substantial growth potential for South African farmers and exporters. The agreement is also expected to stimulate investment across the agricultural value chain, including farming operations, cold storage, logistics, and packaging infrastructure, strengthening the countryâ??s overall export competitiveness.

The Western Cape, a key production hub for stone fruits and a major employer of agricultural labour, is expected to benefit directly from increased export activity, with potential gains in job creation and rural economic activity across supporting sectors such as transport and supply chain services.

With China emerging as a strategic high-volume destination for fresh produce, South Africaâ??s stone fruit sector is positioned for a new growth trajectory, contingent on sustained supply capacity, efficient logistics execution, and continued compliance with export quality and phytosanitary standards.