By Fred Meintjes

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A question of access

New South African citrus season due to kick off in the US amidst access questions

South African citrus growers in the Western and Northern parts of the Cape region are gearing up for the start of their 2019 export season to the US.

The season kicks off at a time when the rest of the South African citrus growers are being frustrated by the delay in the announcement of extended access by the US authorities for the country's citrus.

It is not clear at all whether there will be progress this season, and given the groundwork still to be done by growers once the access is implemented, it is doubtful whether it will have an effect on this campaign's shipments.

It seems as if the South African citrus growers are being 'held hostage', because the Americans themselves are insisting on better access for some of their products into South Africa. This in turn has forced the South Africans to embark on elaborate lobbying and other programmes to try and put pressure on the Americans.

The South African Citrus Growers'

Association's (CGA) special representative in the US, Nicholas Gutierrez, recently told citrus growers on a visit to the country that the US Secretary and the US Under-Secretary for Trade were holding back the new citrus rule pending a 'Quid pro Quo' with US pork and poultry.

"While APHIS was very transparent in its ruling that it had no additional risk concerns for South African citrus and while the rule was expected to be published in the summer of 2018, nothing happened," he said.

It seems that South African citrus is now caught up in the widely publicised trade wars conducted under the Trump presidency and is firmly lodged between chicken and pork.

Gutierrez said it was important that South Africa did not negate on the bilateral poultry agreement as agitated for by some sections of the South African poultry industry. "Pork is much more contentious than poultry because South Africa demands strict adherence to special health requirements."

He noted that the South African pork industry was not willing to agree to relaxed requirements, while on the other side of the Atlantic, the US Pork industry was screaming down the ears of the USDA.

It seems that the South African industry has no option other than to engage in a difficult and time consuming lobbying process to move the various parties closer together on a matter which has nothing to do with the citrus industry.

At the same time citrus growers who are currently excluded from exporting to the US cannot wait to enter this market.

Multinational producer and marketer, San Miguel, said it was excited about supplementing its current supplies to the US market with fruit from its South African orchards.

"We are very enthusiastic about this market," noted Andries du Preez, country manager in South Africa. "We currently export to the US from our other San Miguel Production origins like Argentina (Lemons), Uruguay (lemons and soft citrus) and Peru (avocados,

grapes and mandarins). We have great retail programmes and access to consumers throughout the country."

Du Preez said that San Miguel believed a market opening for the whole of South Africa would be great news for the whole industry.

"Soft citrus consumption is growing steadily in the US and we believe this trend will continue. Also by having the US market, South Africa will have a better diversification of destination markets. That will allow us to avoid a market saturation situation as we've seen before."

Riaan Ellis, commercial manager of another multinational, Unifrutti, believes that wider US market access, as seen in the big picture for the SA industry, is good because it will open up another segment to a market that can accommodate the industry's products successfully.

"We are only asking that the SA Industry to act responsibly. Some items and windows can work, and others cannot. It should not be seen as a market that can simply absorb a big volume, but rather one that needs to be carefully planned per item and window."