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Middle East disruption hits SA lemon exports

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Middle East conflict has disrupted South African lemon exports to Iraq, forcing some fruit to be redirected to local juice factories. Source: Filo gèn'

South African lemon exports to Iraq have become uneconomical as conflict in the Middle East increases logistics costs, forcing growers to redirect fruit to local juice factories at lower returns.

The additional cost of transhipment through Turkey had disrupted supply lines for grade 3 lemons destined for Iraq, the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) announced.

Very little grade 3 fruit is currently being packed for the Iraqi market, with volumes instead being redirected to local juice factories.

"Our growers are resilient, but the cost of geopolitical instability is real, and it is felt on every farm," said Leroux Venter, chairperson of the CGA's Lemon Variety Focus Group.

"We are monitoring the situation closely, particularly as the Northern Hemisphere season approaches and market dynamics continue to shift."

Early season winds down

The disruption comes as an unusually early and larger South African lemon season draws to a close.

The CGA said the northern growing regions had effectively completed their season, with final volumes tracking closely with updated estimates.

In the Sundays River Valley, the season progressed significantly faster than usual.

“This season has also produced an unusual packing pattern. For the first time, a significant number of Sundays River Valley producers completed close to 80% of their lemon crop by the end of June – a departure from previous seasons in which progress across the valley has typically been far more uniform,” said Hannes de Waal, vice-chairperson of the CGA and CEO of the Sundays River Citrus Company.

Increased rainfall resulted in improved fruit size and significantly higher yields per hectare in the Sundays River Valley after two consecutive years of average crops.

Current fruit sizing means growers are exporting count 64 and smaller lemons, while larger fruit is being directed to the valley’s three juice factories. Volumes destined for processing could increase due to modestly improved lemon juice and oil prices.

The Western Cape lemon season has followed a similar pattern to the Eastern Cape, with volumes expected to taper off soon.

The CGA said the national lemon export estimate remained unchanged at 49.4 million 15kg cartons.