Chainn’s Evert Jan van Vliet on how the severe weather affected South African citrus crops:

“Everything’s different this year”

This year's citrus season is unfolding entirely differently than usual, says Evert Jan van Vliet, citrus specialist at Chainn in the Netherlands. "Normally, South Africa would've started harvesting citrus in around week 6. This year, the first shipments didn't leave Durban until around week 16." Due to that delay, lemons hit the European market at roughly the same time as other citrus varieties, such as grapefruit, leading to logistical bottlenecks and an oversupply.

Also, due to the unrest in the Middle East, some shipments did not reach their intended destinations, ending up in Europe instead. "So, it's a season in which everything's different," Evert explains.

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Severe weather hit South African crops

That is because of the severe weather in South Africa. It rained heavily, especially in the northern part of the country, causing flooding in the first months of the year.

Other growing regions were later also affected. "A significant portion of the harvest was lost in that flooding. In the coming months, the orange and mandarin supplies will reflect that, both volume and quality-wise."

That, however, has not yet translated into higher prices. Europe is, in fact, getting more South African citrus than usual, while Egypt and Spain, too, are still supplying in full force. "You have to wonder if there's sufficient demand in the European market to absorb those extra volumes," says Evert.

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Price reaction should follow

He thinks the impact will become apparent later in the season. The persistent rain meant crop protection programs could not be done as planned everywhere, increasing the risk of Black Spot. Much of the fruit will, thus, be unsuitable for export to Europe. Exports from the Eastern Cape should be lower, too. "The question is if the various consequences will cancel each other out. I do expect prices to react at some point."

One upside is that citrus from the Western Cape can again be exported to the United States, as last year's trade barriers have been lifted. That offers exporters more flexibility and reduces pressure on the European market.

Flexible market response

Despite all these hiccups, the demand for lemons, oranges, and mandarins remains stable, according to Evert, though grapefruit consumption keeps declining. The market is, however, increasingly promotion-driven.

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For Chainn, their added value lies in these uncertain times. "Our network is strong enough to continue meeting demand," says Van Vliet. "Sometimes that requires using other sources. For specialists who can adapt quickly and have a Plan B, there are opportunities."

Evert adds that flavor is more important. "Offer the right variety at the right time, and your sales immediately pick up," he concludes.

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