

IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

Record citrus season raises bar for port performance

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Alan Barr, managing partner at KPMG Gqeberha and head of private enterprise in South Africa and Bertie Hamman, executive head of commercial agribusiness at Standard Bank. Source: Ed Richardson

South Africa's record 2025 citrus season has strengthened its position as the world's leading citrus exporter, but continued improvements in port productivity will be critical to sustaining future growth, industry leaders say.

South African growers exported about 203 million 15kg cartons of citrus in more than 120 000 reefer containers to over 100 destinations in 2025, Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) chief executive officer Boitshoko Ntshabele said during a panel discussion hosted by Exporters Eastern Cape.

Participants agreed that the record season had been achieved through close collaboration across the citrus value chain, including the Transnet National Ports Authority.

"This success did not just happen by chance," said Bertie Hamman, executive head of commercial agribusiness at Standard Bank.

He attributed the achievement to significant investment by growers in new orchards and packhouses, the introduction of new citrus varieties and the CGA's efforts to expand market access, enabling South Africa to capitalise on growing global demand for quality citrus.

Looking ahead

Eastern Cape growers were well positioned for growth because of their proximity to export ports, which reduced logistics costs and transit times while helping preserve fruit quality and providing a competitive advantage, Mitchell Brooke, logistics development manager at the CGA, said.

However, sustaining the industry's expansion would depend on continued improvements in port productivity, he said.

The CGA's Vision 260 strategy aims to increase exports to 260 million 15kg cartons by 2032, with growth expected to come mainly from expanding existing markets, as South Africa had already gained access to most viable export destinations.

Europe remains South Africa's largest citrus export market, accounting for 36% of exports, followed by the Middle East (20%), Russia (10%) and the United States and Canada combined (9%).

The industry would focus on quality rather than simply increasing volumes, Ntshabele said, noting that South Africa's position as the world's leading citrus exporter could be short-lived as Spanish production recovered from drought, which had reduced that country's 2025 citrus crop by about 10%.

With competition from Spain, Egypt, Morocco and the United States expected to remain strong, he said quality would be one of the industry's key differentiators this season.

The Eastern Cape produced about one-third of South Africa's citrus exports, supplying premium fruit to markets across Europe, Asia, the Middle East and North America, Exporters Eastern Cape strategic manager Samantha Dunlop said. She added that the Sundays River Valley, the country's largest citrus-producing region, was renowned for its high-quality export fruit.

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