

Citrus packing suspended, while rain stops lemon harvesting in Sundays River Valley

Catastrophic flooding sweeps through Gamtoos Valley

A gigantic mass of water is moving through the valleys of the Eastern Cape coastal belt along with a beach surge. Close to a thousand millimetres fell over the course of three days.

Over 18 hours, the Kouga Dam filled up from 32% full to 119% and is currently overflowing to the extent that its water flow can no longer be measured. There are questions about the state of the other dams in the area, like the Loerie Dam.

Authorities have taken to the sky to assess the situation and to estimate the mass of water still moving downstream, but "chaos" is the word Rienette Colesky, CEO of the Kouga Dam authority, uses when talking about the situation. "We're uncertain whether the worst is past," says a Gamtoos Valley citrus grower, "though water levels are lower than last night. We just don't know how much water is still on its way."



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Packhouses are shut, and residents in low-lying areas have been advised to evacuate. In the Sundays River Valley, where that river is rising, citrus growers are watching it anxiously. Because of the rain, they cannot harvest, so they'll be packing away what is already in the bins.

The extreme cutoff low-pressure system, of which the South African Weather Service had warned last week, also left heavy snowfall over the Karoo.



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Screenshot of trees standing four or five metres deep in flood water in a Gamtoos Valley orchard

Roads, power infrastructure washed away

In the Gamtoos Valley, a lack of electricity is the biggest problem, says a Gamtoos farmer, with cell phone towers losing connectivity. Since Wednesday, 7 May, no packing or fruit inspections by the Perishable Products Export Control Board have been able to take place.

"Power outages, communication disruptions, and severely compromised road access meant that packhouse facilities could not operate, and that PPECB inspectors were unable to access the valley to conduct the statutory inspections required for export certification," adds an exporter, some of whose growers have had to evacuate their homes.

Videos show citrus orchards in the Gamtoos Valley with only the tips of the orchards sticking out, inundated four to five metres deep.

Meanwhile, the east-west arterial through the Langkloof has been gouged out in its entirety at one point as water again surges through apple and pear orchards.



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The lull in lemon picking in the Sundays River Valley will give the volumes on the water time to be fully absorbed, he remarks. "The lemon crop itself is in excellent condition, and the season outlook remains very positive."

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