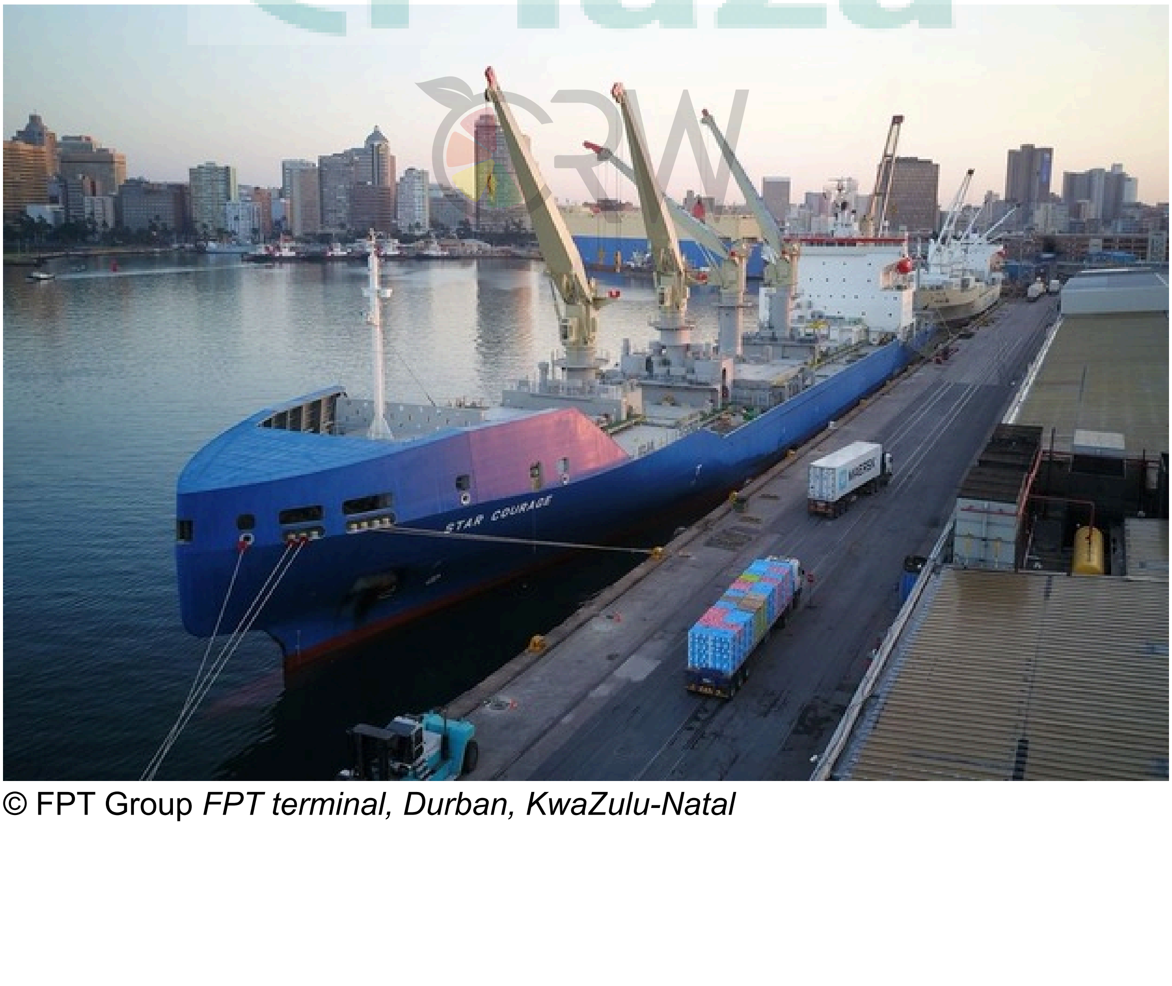
Paulo Franco – FPT Group

FPT Durban terminal to benefit from latest in automation and AI technologies

South Africa is now officially the world's largest citrus exporter, and it's companies like the FPT Group, operator of private port terminals at Durban, Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), and Cape Town, that make the last leg happen.

Recent floods have caused major disruptions in the Eastern and Western regions, which might affect the export volumes out of those areas. "We're still waiting for producers to tell us what the impact will be on the forecast of fruit. It's a difficult one," remarks Paulo Franco, managing director of the FPT Group.



© FPT Group *FPT terminal, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal*

The FPT Group has just had its lease renewed by TNPA - Transnet National Ports Authority to continue operating the Durban terminal, prolonging its lease to 2047. All of South Africa's conventional shipping (reefer vessels) is loaded at FPT terminals.

"Our Durban facility is now over 30 years old, and we need more efficiency. We need better cooling, faster cooling, and improved processing of the fruit so that we can improve on all deficiencies cost-wise. New cooling technologies are a lot more efficient and quicker, which is better for the product," he explains, adding that they are introducing a high degree of automation into the process.

Starting towards the end of the current citrus season, every single office and building at Durban FPT is due to be rebuilt, Franco says. "We're going to do a full refurbishment of the facility, with modern equipment, all new cold rooms, all new cooling facilities. Everything that you see inside the building will disappear, and modern state-of-the-art equipment will be installed."

Franco continues: "We're also putting a lot of investment in AI for our own warehouse management system. It's a long conversation as far as AI is concerned," he observes, "but we're putting quite some money behind that to evaluate what benefits we can extract from it to improve the processes."

It will take about three years to do the entire facility, after which this will be South Africa's youngest and most modern port terminal.

"We believe in the fruit industry"

It is clear that the industry needs to complement road transport with rail – recently the Citrus Growers' Association estimated that the northern corridor, bringing citrus from Limpopo and Mpumalanga to Durban, could require an additional thousand reefer truck trips a week, while the Eastern and Western Cape corridors combined would require at least another 1,400 trips during peak season.

The long-term vision of many in the industry, wholly shared by the FPT Group, is to reduce the number of reefer trucks through improved integration of the rail network. Franco says they are working on a number of projects that will eventually flow from the greenfield construction of cold rooms in Cato Ridge, a back-of-port facility of 35,000 m^2 situated 50km from Durban harbour.

© FPT Group*FPT cold rooms under construction in Cato Ridge, a back-of-port facility to Durban port*

"It's quite a big investment because we believe in the fruit industry going forward," Franco observes. "The project is scheduled to be completed by February or March next year, and we will achieve that."

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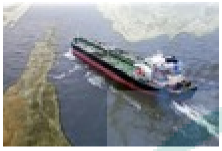

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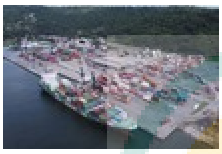

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