Hoedspruit, Letsitele

South Africa: Grapefruit volumes almost halved due to hail and drought

Hoedspruit and Letsitele, where about 60% of South Africa's grapefruit is grown, is in a serious drought situation, to add to the woes of the growers the area was also hit by hail last November which has made predictions for the coming season even lower.

Erwee Topham from Alliance Fruit said that some growers will see a total loss but the average will be around a 30-50% drop in volumes from the area.

"The situation here is very serious, some growers have more water than others but in general water restrictions are at 30% in Letsitele and 60% in Hoedspruit. The lack of water had a negative impact on fruit set and size," he explains.

Some older orchards have already been taken out to preserve water, while others have been cut down and painted white to save the trees for future years.

"We only have around 8-10 weeks left of the summer rain season, if there is not some significant rain in this period then the dams won't have water for next year to set any crop," according to Erwee. "So far this year the Hoedspruit area has only had 14-25mm of rainfall which was two weeks ago and with daily temperatures between 35-42 °C we need some more rain for sure."

The grapefruit harvest will start on time despite the drought which has brought other fruit crops on earlier, but grapefruit is one of the fruits which keeps on growing and if they can leave it a few weeks longer (water and temperature permitting) the fruit may be a size bigger.

"I think we will start mid April as normal and continue through to the end of June, we will stretch it as far we can to help with the marketing. The sugar levels should be high and quality should be excellent," assures Erwee.

Asia is known to demand bigger fruit and on grapefruit they prefer the medium to large sizes which won't be freely available this year, "China and Korea are paying a premium and fixed prices for those sizes so I would guess that those markets will get priority, Japan on the other hand does not feature significantly in our exports anymore, we have a decreasing trend like Florida with them. The exchange rate this year will make huge difference but that is the case for every country so I don't see much going to Japan, we are not focussing on Japan as the main market any more as it has not been a profitable market the past couple of seasons."

Alliance Fruit will focus on China, Korea and the South Sea Islands and of course Europe, that still takes about 40% of our volumes.

The European demand has steadied off after a few years of oversupply and according to Erwee there have been enough trees taken out and new markets developed in the last few years to make grapefruit profitable again. He adds that it is also not the most economical fruit to export as it is packed in big cartons only fitting a few on each pallet, logistically it is very expensive.

Alliance Fruit's volumes will be down 30-40% on last year if we stay only with the same growers, but it seems to be the same for everyone up north, growers in the Eastern Cape do seem to have a better crop.

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Some more photos of the hail damage last November


Fresh
Plaza

Publication date: 2/18/2016
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