

Crucial time ahead for RSA citrus growers

Drought and water shortages in South Africa's northern regions are threatening the next citrus crop

Citrus growers in South Africa's northern regions desperately need sufficient rain during the next few months to avert potentially serious crop losses.

Weather experts have warned that the country could have another dry summer, and with irrigation supplies at dangerously low levels, some growers fear the worst.

The continuing drought in southern Africa has already influenced the current citrus season, with the crop dropping from 118m cartons the previous year to a predicted 106m cartons this season. Despite this drop, the industry is having a good time in the international market, with demand being very high and exporters competing for supplies.

This could all change, however, if the drought continues. In the Letsitele area north of Tzaneen some growers have experienced a drop in the crop of between 35 per cent to 40 per cent this year because of the drought and water shortages.

At the start of the spring, the Tzaneen dam which supplies water into the Letaba River which is the main source of water for citrus growers in this region is only 27 per cent full. The dam also supplies the sprawling local towns and housing estates and there is real concern about the next year if there is not sufficient rain during the spring and early summer.

A leading grower in the region, Barend Voster of Mahela Farms, says growers are forced to drill boreholes as an emergency to deal with what could be a very severe water crisis. "We are using all our water reserves as best we can to set the crop and only hope that there will be sufficient rain," he says.

The crucial months for significant rains to relieve the situation will be from September to November. If it rains later than that, it may well be too late and growers will suffer great losses.

Further away towards Hoedspruit, growers suffered damage because of hail this year and now also have to contend with severe water shortages.

In the Lowveld regions near Nelspruit in Mpumalanga, the Crocodile River, which is the lifeline for growers in this region, has stopped flowing and growers say they will face severe problems if there is not significant rain from September onwards.

"We will be able to set the crop," says Maarten Venter of Komati Citrus, "but the challenge then is to sustain the fruit on the tree."

In this region crops were already down this year, but strong markets are still making up for the volume loss.

Growers emphasise that good rains can change the situation overnight, but if one has to believe the weather prophets this may not happen. Growers are normally optimistic people and that is why they will still keep believing despite the forecasts of the prophets of doom.

