

"It's a disaster. I've never seen anything like this."

South African navel exports from Eastern Cape possibly 50% down

South Africa, the biggest exporter of navel oranges in the Southern Hemisphere, has a problem: the skin of early and mid-season navel varieties are splitting on the underside and there is an unprecedented level of fruit drop; so much so that Eastern Cape growers reckon there might be up to 50% or even less class 1 and class 2 navel oranges for export. Some in the industry are predicting a drop of 4 or 5 million 15 kg export cartons from the original 26 325 830 carton estimate.

"It's a disaster. In my 19 years in the industry I have never seen anything like this," says Snyman Kritzinger of Grown4U in the Gamtoos Valley, Eastern Cape. Hannes de Waal, managing director of the Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC) says that it's the first time in living memory that something like this has happened on this scale. Madeleine Ludwig, technical manager of Patensie Citrus in the Gamtoos Valley confirms the incidence of splitting, much higher than usual, in the orchards of their producers. Piet Smit, producer in Citrusdal, Western Cape and from Favourite Fresh Export, concurs that he has never seen it this bad, although it doesn't seem as acute there as in the Eastern Cape.



FreshPlaza has spoken to growers in Limpopo and the Senwes region who confirm that they haven't seen the same problem on their navels, so it appears to be restricted to the Western and particularly the Eastern Cape.

"At first we thought the harvest might be 30% lower but now we're thinking it might be up to 50% down," says Hannes de Waal of the SRCC. Grown4U's Snyman Kritzinger believes that with Navel exports reduced by 50% or more, coupled with a stronger Rand, farmers' real income from navels will be dramatically lower. There is already little expansion in navel plantings and this might very well reduce that even further. The problem with splitting is also affecting Valencias and Novas, but not to such a dramatic degree.

On the up side, however, Kritzinger says that the internal quality of their Navel oranges is fantastic with good colour.

There are unconfirmed reports of farmers scrapping their navel export plans for 2017, and instead marketing all the navels they can salvage on the local market, but the latter wouldn't be able to absorb such a spike in navel volumes.

All of the farmers that FreshPlaza spoke to will still be exporting. "We've alerted our clients to the problem with the Navels and we'll focus on the emptier markets, like the Middle East. The Middle East is very important to us and there'll also be small amounts going to Canada. We're growing in Southeast Asia and later we'll be moving to the EU where navels are very popular in countries like the Netherlands and France," says De Waal. Piet Smit adds that they can see an increase in navel demand in the run-up to Ramadan in the Middle East.



Some growth in navel volumes is forecast for the north of the country (the Senwes region, the other large navel producing region, has estimated a 21% increase) but industry experts believe that it won't be adequate to offset the reduction in total navel volumes. "The problem with the splitting will have a big influence on the industry," opines Smit.

The reasons for the severity of the occurrence this year are still unclear, and a team from Citrus Research International (CRI) are due to start their investigations into the problem. Initially it was thought that a salt buildup due to irrigation might be the problem, but its occurrence in Western Cape orchards with access to fresh mountain water has nixed that idea. National extension manager of CRI Hannes Bester is of the opinion that the reason can be found in extremely high temperatures and low relative humidity, or any other stress conditions, during the fruit set and fruit developing period from October to February this year which adversely affected cytokinesis (cell division) within the rind. Hannes de Waal from the Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC) also mentions that where they normally get some rain during October, there was none last year. "For a while now nature hasn't been playing along. Over the past 18 months we have had exactly half our usual rainfall."



The split in the rind leads to infections, and trees drop the infected fruit. In some orchards in the Eastern Cape 30 to 40% of the navels have dropped and farmers have no choice but to dispose of them.

The packing process is retarded as the fruit must be scrutinised for the tears and splits, some of which are miniscule, as no such fruit can be considered for export. "In packhouses the critical control points like the drench, the dumping bath, fungicide bath and waxing of the fruit will have to be meticulously managed to prevent post-harvest decay," says Bester of the CRI. The navels are drenched in fungicide before going to the degreening rooms.

On a general note, De Waal is happy to note that there's almost no overlap between the Northern and the Southern Hemisphere's citrus seasons this year and says they're expecting a strong orange season. Smit of Favourite Fresh Export expects a good season in the UK and the EU where markets are empty, adding that they're looking forward to an exciting season.

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