

[National](#)

Mystery infection set to halve navel orange harvest

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Picture: ISTOCK

The orange industry is facing a "disaster", with up to 40% of navels dropping off trees in the Eastern Cape.

A team from Citrus Research International in Nelspruit has been called in to investigate the problem, which threatens to halve the harvest.

"In my 19 years in the industry, I have never seen anything like this," farmer Snyman Kritzinger, from the Gamtoos Valley in the Eastern Cape, told the industry website FreshPlaza.

The loss of early and mid-season navels is expected to reduce exports of 15kg cartons by between 15% and 20%. The original export estimate for the season was 26.3-million cartons.

"At first we thought the harvest might be 30% lower but now we're thinking it might be 50% down," said Hannes de Waal, MD of the Sundays River Citrus Company.

He said it was the first time in living memory something like this had happened on such a scale.

Piet Smith, a producer in Citrusdal in the Western Cape, said while he had not seen a situation this bad, it was not as acute as in the Eastern Cape. The Limpopo growing area is not affected, and neither is the Senwes region in Mpumalanga, where a 21% increase in volume is forecast.

The skin of affected oranges is splitting, leading to infections which end with the fruit dropping, and Citrus Research International's Hannes Bester said he believed the drought was to blame.

"For a while now nature hasn't been playing along," he told FreshPlaza. "Over the past 18 months we have had exactly half our usual rainfall."

Bester said packhouses had reduced productivity in order to inspect fruit more closely, as any split in the rind made an orange ineligible for export.

"The critical aspects like the drenching and waxing of the fruit will have to be meticulously executed," he said, adding that oranges without splits and tears were being drenched in fungicide.

FreshPlaza said there were unconfirmed reports of farmers scrapping all navel exports and attempting to sell the fruit locally.

"We've alerted our clients to the problem with the navels and we'll focus on the emptier markets, like the Middle East," de Waal said.

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