

Growing concern about coming season amid below average winter rainfall

South Africa: Delays to Valencia harvests in Citrusdal

Despite excellent Brix levels, there have been some delays in Midknight, Valencia and some late mandarin packing in Citrusdal, Western Cape. Acid levels have been slow in dropping to the required levels, a localised phenomenon that occurs from time to time, for reasons which aren't quite clear but probably related to climatic conditions, and this year it has caused delays, as much as six weeks in the Valencia harvest in one instance.

Citrus growers in this area have access to the USA market, which generally requires a high sugar-to-acid ratio, and growers are keeping the fruit on the trees until levels are safely below the maximum of 1.5.



Citrusdal growers pride themselves on the sweetness of their soft citrus, like late mandarins (as well as navel-types and navels). They say that's due to their Mediterranean climate, their water quality and their soil type.

The Volcani Institute's Orri is becoming a particular favourite. "It is incredibly tasty, known for its high Brix, but more than that – you can recognise the Orri's taste. It has a scented flavour which makes it quite unique," says Piet Smit of Favourite Fresh Export. "Most markets don't yet make a distinction between the Orri and the Mor, but in France they've started distinguishing and they ask for Orri specifically. Our big markets for Orri are therefore France and the USA."

He singles out soft citrus – clemenules, late mandarins, as well as Nadorcotts – as the outstanding cultivars of the season in their region. Hendrik Warnich, marketing manager of ALG Estates, agrees that the Brix levels are excellent this season.



Buoyant Valencia markets globally

"The markets for Valencias are looking good, we don't have the problems we had for navels," says Smit. "It's strong in the EU, the USA, the Far East and still relatively strong in the Middle East too and it's a result of sensible and responsible marketing by South African exporters."

Hannes de Waal, managing director of the Sundays River Citrus Company in the Eastern Cape, says that their total citrus volumes were the lowest this year that it has been in 10 years due to three very difficult factors: the infamous navel splitting, followed by hot winds in mid-winter damaging the trees and lastly extremely small-sized lemons. At least there is one category that's working out well for the Eastern Cape this year, and that is Valencias.

The Valencia harvest is riding high on a buoyant market. In-store juice machines in Europe have been a boon for South African Valencias, especially in the wake of Hurricane Irma in Florida, although South African Valencia exporters note that they saw strong demand even before that. The global orange market was empty, with South Africa sending out almost seven million fewer cartons of navels this year.

"A small size on a Valencia is no sin," notes De Waal. "We have a lot of 88s and 105s, medium sizes, which is just right for the Middle East and Europe. Perhaps we have more 144s than we'd like, but we have a good juice market. There's firm demand for South African Valencias, regardless of volumes."



Effect of drought on Citrusdal and the Sundays River Valley

Citrusdal is situated along the upper reaches of the Olifants River, which has been their salvation up until now. Producers are allowed to withdraw water from the river until the end of September, as the region is a winter rainfall area, and growers are

currently filling their dams from the river for the coming season.

"We're expecting water restrictions going forward, but we're in trouble. It's going to be an incredibly challenging season," warns Piet Smit. Okkie Burger of Quattro Citrus, part of the Muñoz Group, agrees, citing this winter's below average rainfall figures: where usually they expect around 350mm, he's measured only about 130mm thus far. "What we're waiting for is a solid amount of rain, 50mm or more, to fill up the river. This winter we've been getting a lot of small showers."

There are indications of citrus producers following the example of topfruit and stonefruit producers in the Boland, which is to take the difficult decision to prioritise the water needs of high-value, productive orchards, at the expense of older or less productive ones.

Less productive orchards are sometimes cut back, leaving the rootstock and a basic framework of branches, painted white to protect against sunburn, and just kept alive for the coming season, foregoing a harvest from those blocks. Other growers are making the even tougher decision to take out orchards that were originally only earmarked for removal some years hence.

The Sundays River Valley has been in a more fortunate position than both the Western Cape and the other large fruit production regions of the Eastern Cape, Patensie and the Langkloof, because of their relative proximity to the giant Gariep Dam, which is a reliable source of irrigation water for them. The dam is currently 66% full, so water isn't such a concern but precipitation isn't the only thing that rain brings.

"There's a whole combination of factors that have to be right, among them cooler temperatures during blossoming and fruit set to avoid the problems we had last year with the navels. We're lucky to have sufficient irrigation water but rainwater washes built-up salts from the soil. Thunderstorms release nitrogen to an extent that's difficult to do manually. You can see the trees are greener after a thunderstorm," explains Hannes de Waal of the Sundays River Citrus Company. "We're not complaining, we're still very grateful. Our situation isn't as critical as in other parts of the country but still, we need rain. We need about 100mm before the end of November."

In Citrusdal and the Sundays River Valley, as in the rest of the larger Cape, farmers are hoping for substantial late winter rains or, at least, a mild springtime.

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