

"Tough times in the Gamtoos" due to drought; Sundays River Valley's water situation more positive

Excessive temperatures worry Western Cape citrus farmers

Excessive temperatures in the Western Cape – with a maximum of 46°C recorded last week – could exacerbate the usual fruit fall of this time of the year, often called the November drop. For most of the week Citrusdal and the surrounding areas have been sweltering in mid-forties temperatures, which is expected to be reflected in fruit fall.



"Yet we also need the heat to develop sugars," says Piet Smit of Favourite Fresh Exports. "The biggest negative effect from the heat is that water loss from the tree is so much higher."

He continues that Citrusdal producers are very worried about the drought. "We've had two consecutive below average winters. In Citrusdal we had about 50%, and in some cases even less, rain this winter. Below the Clanwilliam Dam, towards Vredendal, the Olifants River didn't even run this winter and they have 20% of their water allocation rights this season."

He feels the effect of the drought could be even more visible in next year's crop than this past season. "We started this season with lower water supplies plus we only have 40% of our water allocation rights for the Olifants River, not to be used for filling up storage dams but only for irrigation. Last year we could still use 100% of our rights."

Optimism around coming Eastern Cape crop, despite fruit drop concerns

Meanwhile, in the Eastern Cape, particularly in the Gamtoos Valley where the water shortage is critical, the effect of three successive particularly hot days four weeks ago is now manifesting in a rate of fruit drop that concerns some in the industry. (Localised hail a week ago has also knocked off some fruit in a number of blocks around Kirkwood in the Sundays River valley.)

"We're seeing more fruit drop than usual on the Midnights and the older Nova trees," says Snyman Kritzing, managing director of Grown4U in Kirkwood. "Lemons, however, are showing no abnormal fruit drop. Around here lemons grow very well and the crop looks good for the 2018 season."



A Gamtoos producer confirms that while other varieties in general look good, Midnights have dropped a lot, and it could continue into December as the heat from the Western Cape moves eastwards. Fruit drop also depends on tree health, on rootstock as well as on access to water. Farmers in the area who had the water, sprayed gibberellic acid during bloomtime and this seems to have lessened fruit drop somewhat.

Hannes de Waal of the Sundays River Citrus Company in the Sundays River Valley, whose water situation is less acute than that of the Gamtoos Valley, is hesitant to see more in the fruit fall in his area than the usual November drop. "I'm optimistic about the coming season. I think we're likely back at a normal harvest, which is still below the projected growth curve, but at least it's a

normal harvest, which is good news, especially after the one we had this year. We get rain now and then, so we're quite satisfied with our condition."

The Sundays River Valley has water usage rights from the large Gariep Dam, at 57.5% at the moment.

He emphasises that it's too early to make any definitive statements on the upcoming harvest before February.



"Tough times in the Gamtoos"

The Gamtoos Valley (as well as the City of Port Elizabeth) is dependent on the Kouga Dam, just west of Patensie, which stands 12.8%, having gained perhaps two percentage points after the rain a month ago in the Langkloof.

Gamtoos farmers' access to water from this dam is in line to be cut off in January should the situation remain unchanged. There are reports of rain, even above average rainfall, predicted for the area in January which would come as a godsend to citrus farmers.

One Gamtoos farmer says they have only 66% left of their allocation of 40% for the season, and the hottest months still lie ahead.

Four weeks ago Gamtoos Irrigation Board chief executive Pierre Joubert told The Herald newspaper in Port Elizabeth that water in the Kouga Dam was being prioritised for agriculture: "We are releasing enough to supply Patensie and Hankey, and that's it."

After the recent Langkloof rain, farmers were able to save on irrigation costs, but, he continued, once the present rains dried up, their curtailed supply from the Kouga Dam – reduced to 40% of the normal allocation – would again kick in.

"It's tough times in the Gamtoos."

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