

Gamtoos Valley dam level critical but Sundays River Valley in better nick

Eastern Cape expects normal citrus harvest, perhaps two weeks late

Temperatures are high in the Eastern Cape at the moment, reaching over 40°C last week (43°C measured on Thursday), with the warmest month of February ahead and in the Gamtoos Valley very little water. In fact, the Kouga Dam is 8.53% full, a percentage point down from last week, causing great concern among citrus farmers in the Hankey-Patensie area.

"The biggest drama at the moment is the drought, it dominates all conversations," says Snyman Kritzing, managing director of Grown4U.

"The heat's not unusual for this time of the year, as long as we don't get more than ten days of these temperatures, but around here one day is scorching hot and the next day it falls by a few degrees. However, February, the hottest month, is still ahead of us and the Kouga Dam level is really very low. Towards Hankey about 10% of farmers make use of boreholes."

Thus far, he says, the only visible effect of the heat has been on older Midnight navel trees, with a higher incidence of fruit drop than normal at the end of last year.

The Gamtoos Valley Irrigation Board has cut water allocation to 40% of the usual quota of 8,000m³ per hectare, starting from 1 July 2017. This amount has to last farmers through until 30 June 2018. The board recommends that irrigation schedules should reach 45% of the reduced quota by 31 December, to leave just over half the allocated amount for the remainder of the summer.

The heat hasn't only affected citrus. Inside some blueberry tunnels in the Gamtoos Valley temperatures reached 57°C last week, placing even more strain on their already tenuous water supply.

Sundays River Valley in better position, harvest could be a bit late

Things are looking better in the Sundays River Valley because of its dependence on the large Gariep Dam, situated deeper inland in the Free State Province and currently at 56.7%. In fact, the Sundays River Valley is in a more favourable position than the much of the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape.

"Our water situation is okay, we're not in a crisis," says Hannes de Waal, managing director of the Sundays River Valley Citrus Company. "The season looks like it could be about two weeks late, but we'll only know for sure by February."

He continues: "The harvest might not be as large as I'd hoped but we are still in a drought cycle, so it's understandable. However, it'll be a better harvest than last year – that is to say, a normal harvest. But when you consider all of the new trees, I'd really been hoping for a bumper harvest."

By this time last year, citrus producers in the Eastern Cape were noticing with dismay the infamous navel splitting, of which there is fortunately no sign this year. "Our weather conditions are very different to last year," notes Hannes de Waal. "Lemons dropped a bit at the end of last year, and I expect the lemon harvest could be smaller than last year's record harvest, but one should proceed with caution before February. It's only then that we'll really know what to expect of the season."

The citrus season is expected to start just after Easter weekend in the Eastern Cape, with the lemon harvest commencing around week 16.



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