

Noose tightens for Western Cape growers

Drought conditions mean underground water uses are under scrutiny in the Cape region

The water use by fruit and other agricultural sectors is increasingly coming under the spotlight as the Cape region of South Africa, and one of the world's iconic cities, Cape Town, faces up to the fact that water supplies will run out within three months.

Government officials this week visited fruit regions to inspect water use, particularly from boreholes which have been sunk to alleviate shortages and cutbacks from water schemes.

Growers across the region have been sinking boreholes to augment their supplies but the government now requires these underground sources to be licenced and monitored to establish just how much water is used.

January and February are normally the driest months of the year and during the past weeks it has also been exceedingly hot.

The weather prophets say it is unlikely that any significant rains will fall during the next two months, and that there is little that can be done to avoid day zero, when the taps are switched off.

As if this is not enough, fruit growers have something else to worry about. Hortgro has called on its members to make sure they uphold food safety and quality standards.

"As an industry we have noted the listeria outbreak in South Africa. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) it is the largest outbreak ever recorded. The WHO also indicated that they have yet to identify the source of the pathogen, that there are no clear patterns and that contamination has occurred in all nine provinces," said Hortgro.

"Hortgro, the South African deciduous fruit industry body, subscribes to the highest international food safety standards," the group continued. "All South African packhouses are accredited and follow strict guidelines. Without these protocols and auditing systems the export of fruit would be impossible.

"There is also not direct link between the outbreak and our industry, but we need to be diligent, proactive and have to act responsibly," Hortgro outlined, noting that it would continue to monitor the situation and engage with health professionals when and where required.

"For now, we wish to sensitise all our growers and packhouses of this development and to appeal to everybody to ensure that they diligently follow best practice codes, guidelines and adhere to strict protocols and handling procedures. Tests and inspections should be scheduled and complied with as per the regulations that have been in place for many years.:

Hortgro added that South Africa has been a credible and reliable source of safe fresh produce in a competitive world. The country has an excellent track record which should be maintained.

