

Dry summer has resulted in very low CBS pressure thus far

Producers pleased with first South African lemons

The first South African Eureka lemons harvested in the 2017/2018 season have started arriving in growing numbers at local markets. The fruit, coming from areas around Tshipise and Hoedspruit in Limpopo Province are looking very good. It has been a dry summer since December, some calling this the driest January in many years. In some areas only a quarter of the summer's rain has fallen thus far.

The upshot of a dry summer is low citrus black spot pressure and the early harvest is consequently very clean.



On the local market, which prefers large lemons, prices are still high – R230 (€15.55) to R250 (€16.90) for calibres 75 to 88, R200 (€13.52) to R220 (€14.87) for 100 to 113 – but it is expected to start dipping over the following weeks as the influx of volumes takes off.

Lemon exports have just started to the Middle East, Russia and the Far East. No South African lemons are sent to the EU or UK at the moment because there are still strong supplies from Turkey and Spain.

"The quality is looking really good, it's a very clean harvest, but the dry summer has put some pressure on sizing. The lemons are currently peaking at sizes 100 to 162, which are the preferred sizes for our markets, but there are a number of 189s and 216s which will go primarily for juicing or exported to markets for lower prices," says Erwee Topham, marketing manager at Alliance Fruit, based in Hoedspruit.

"Volumes are picking up strongly and in our production areas of Hoedspruit and Letsitele we're fortunate in that about 70% of our fruit have a longer, oblong shape, preferred in the Far East. It's difficult to say why that is, it's probably for climate-related reasons – we see the same thing on our Midknights and Deltas. There is a definite expansion to the Far East for us in terms of marketing and the other thing is that, at this stage, we don't fit into a proper slot for the European market which still has sufficient volumes from Spain and Turkey. There are still a lot of Turkish fruit."

He adds that traders in other markets are seeking out South African lemons. "We have a better quality fruit, higher juice content and better shelf life, which attract buyers to our product. We're following the chemical protocols for export to the EU and the UK throughout the season, our standards are in line with their specifications, and consumers elsewhere are increasingly also looking at that. We're obtaining good export prices at the moment."



In the Eastern Cape lemons are still maturing in the orchards, with the harvest starting around Easter. Hannes de Waal, chair of the Citrus Growers' Association's lemon focus group expects the South African lemon harvest to be a bit lower than last year. "In the Sunday River Valley we definitely had a smaller first fruit set on our trees and there's not much fruit on the new trees, but that's just how it works. For us it's still too early for a firm idea of what the harvest will bring. It's only by Easter that we'll have a feeling of where we're heading."

Growers in the north of the country thought that their dry spell had been broken, but after the past dry December and January – months which traditionally brought much of the summer's tally – there is a concern that drought might be waiting on the doorstep again, as one producer puts it.

"We're positive, it's a handsome harvest, but we're looking for rain to increase size," says a producer in Hoedspruit.

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