

South Africa in line for record citrus crop

Drought impacts will be more than compensated for this year volume-wise in South Africa's citrus industry thanks to increased lemon and easy peeler plantings in non-traditional areas. Getting that fruit smoothly to market with reasonable returns is another story.

In 2018 the sector will not only have to prove to the EU that it can contain citrus black spot (CBS), but it will also face new EU regulations around false codling moth (FCM). During Fruit Logistica in Berlin last week, we caught up with industry leader Justin Chadwick to discuss the upcoming season, changes in Zimbabwe and contending with the burden of a stronger currency.

"In the Western Cape it's no secret that there's a drought," says Chadwick, CEO of the Citrus Growers Association (CGA) of Southern Africa.

But unlike his peers in table grapes and stonefruit, Chadwick's sector is not so heavily concentrated in that province. He estimates only 10% of the country's citrus crop is in the drought-hit areas of the Western Cape, while a further 4% is subject to dry conditions in the southern part of the Eastern Cape.

This is of course not to downplay the difficult reality for growers in those areas.

"In the Western Cape the biggest citrus-growing area is Citrusdal and they had enough water to set the crop last year, but the issue now will be to get sizing out of the crop; they're a winter rainfall area so you wouldn't expect rain in the summer," he says.

"There will be some negative impact on the drought in the Western Cape and in the southern part of the Eastern Cape, in the Gamtoos Valley in an area called Patensie near Port Elizabeth.

"They're also suffering from the drought. Their dam was at 9% – they've had a bit of rain now but it is quite difficult there. Those areas mostly grow soft citrus."

With a situation such as this, we ask the executive whether this means supermarket buyers might need to start downsizing shelf space for the deal, but actually the opposite is true.

"No. In fact last year was a record crop and this year will be even more, because the other factor that's happened in South Africa is there have been significant plantings of lemons and soft citrus over the last 10 years and that fruit is starting to come into maturity now," he says.

Chadwick pointed out the lemon industry had gone from 15 million cartons to 19 million in the space of one year last season.

"That will continue. Sundays River is our biggest growing area for lemons and they are having a bit of an off season, but lemons have been planted everywhere.

"So there will be an increase – whether there will be an extra four million cartons or not, we'll know at the end of March. Likewise with soft citrus, even though the Western Cape has had the drought there's soft citrus being grown in the north a lot now."

Last year the sector achieved exports of 121 million cartons, which could have been higher if five million cartons of Navel oranges weren't lost to an [unusual case of fruit drop](#).

"It was all to do with a particular period during which we had hot, dry conditions and the relative humidity got to incredibly high levels. As a result, and I'm no scientist, but the cell formation where the fruit joins the stem was impaired so it didn't develop," says the industry head.

“So as the fruit got bigger it couldn’t carry the weight of the fruit on the stem.

“If we had those five million in Navels – although we can’t say exactly as I think some Valencias replaced some of the Navels perhaps – we could have been up to 126 million cartons.”

“We’re staring down 130 million but we’ll know better in March.”

Nipping citrus black spot (CBS) and false codling moth (FCM) in the bud amid strong language from European industry

While citrus black spot (CBS) regulations in Europe have been a thorn in the side of South Africa’s citrus industry for many years, growers have managed to live with it and revolutionize their growing and post-harvest practices in the process.

The sector’s biosecurity credentials progressed in step, but in 2017 the sector saw a lapse in its control of the disease late in the season.

In a press release yesterday, Spain’s Valencian Farmers Association (AVA-ASAJA) hit out at South African industry describing an increase of “outrageous proportions” in CBS interceptions.

The association accused Brussels of being “complicit” with South Africa in seriously threatening the interests of European citrus growers.

“The attitude of South African exporters and the European Commission is simply unacceptable as a mockery and a total joke,” said AVA-ASAJA president Cristóbal Aguado.

“Brussels not only shows itself to be complacent with the excesses of South Africa in terms of pest control, but it also exhibits an intolerable connivance by signing an agreement that rewards South Africa, a country that leads the ranking of black spot interceptions with two-thirds of the 36 registered.

“Apparently the South Africans have carte blanche.”

AVA-ASAJA pointed out that Pekka Pesonen, the general secretary of European producer association group Copa Cogeca, has sent a letter to the EU’s Health and Food Safety Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis citing a “deterioration” of phytosanitary security by not enforcing cold treatment in South African citrus consignments.

Aguado and AVA-ASAJA have stood behind the Copa Cogeca head in his call for the European Commission to scrap current measures.

Prior to these strong words from European industry, Chadwick gave his explanation as to why last year’s anomaly occurred and emphasized the efforts made in response to ensure fewer interceptions in 2018.

“On the CBS issue we had an unfortunate year last year. We went up to 23 interceptions [in Europe] from four the year before, so it definitely puts us in a poorer position. We have strengthened the measures for this year – we brought in another two inspections,” Chadwick says.

“Something like 17 of those interceptions were in a two or three week period...it was mostly Valencia fruit at the end of the season at the end of September and October.”

“What we’ve introduced now is additional field inspections for product leaving in September and October. CBS symptoms are a lot more evident later in the season – you can pick them up in the orchard.”

He says some of these problems late in the year may have been spurred by an early exit from the market for Brazil, leaving a lucrative gap for South African Valencia orange growers.

“So people probably sent in more fruit than they would normally have and as a result we had the additional interceptions,” Chadwick says.

“On CBS that was very unfortunate because we were on a very good downward curve in terms of our interceptions. Every year we were getting less and less; our risk management system is working very well.”

Part of this system involves an electronic compliance database called Phytclean, developed by industry in cooperation with government and now an official function of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF).

The program has been so successful that it's been extended to the entire horticultural industry and may be adopted for agriculture and floriculture as well.

“The department can immediately interrogate and see that a particular farmer and orchard has followed the system,” Chadwick says.

As an initiative that started in development five years ago, Phytclean will be an instrumental part of South Africa's approach to tackling a new pest regulated by the European Union since the start of this year – false codling moth (FCM).

“In South Africa it's for sure our biggest concern for the 2018 season is FCM because it's a whole new requirement,” the industry representative claims.

“Fortunately we've had the learnings from CBS so our industry is pretty quick to react to these threats and we've got a pretty good communication system through the industry now.”

He highlights the pest has only ever been found in Africa and Israel.

“It's found throughout Africa and it's got a wide range of host plants. It's a pest of a number of other products, and over the years there have been significant interceptions by the African countries, mostly on peppers,” Chadwick says, claiming the worst cases had been with Ghana, Kenya and Uganda.

“They picked it up in Israel, Cameroon and Senegal too, so it's a widespread pest in Africa but interesting enough it hasn't established itself elsewhere even though all these countries have been trading into Europe, America, Asia – it seems to have a limited range in terms of intercontinental movement.

“What it [new regulations] means is we've introduced what we call our FCM management system (FMS). That relies on a range of different activities on the farm, inspections and control sprays; in some regions like the Western Cape and Eastern Cape we have sterile insect technology.”

He adds another measure is the introduction of a granular virus in trees that attacks larvae.

“We've got attract and kill. We've got a whole lot of different mechanisms for eradicating the pest before the fruit even gets into the pack house,” he said.

“The growers can choose between different options and then they have to prove to the Department of Agriculture that they've followed those measures,” he said, with registered results and evidence stored and updated within the Phytclean system.

Chadwick believes growers and exporters will be active to ensure new European measures don't impact business too negatively.

“I think our volumes into Europe will continue but it's been a static market for a while now. Our big challenge is to stimulate demand and find new markets to sell the additional crop,” he says.

Exchange rate could cut grower returns

In summary, Chadwick says defining factors for the 2018 campaign will be FCM regulation compliance, the drought, new plantings coming on-stream, and finally exchange rates.

“The rand has strengthened against all currencies in the last two months with the political changes in the country,” he said.

“We did some calculations – if the rand strengthens by 10% the farm gate price drops by 35%, so that’s a third taken off your price. And the rand has strengthened by more than 10%.

“It continues to strengthen and some pundits are estimating it could go to 10.50 to the dollar, so those levels are going to impact on returns. Hopefully farmers are factoring that in with the discussions with their buyers to ensure they have a reasonable return.”

Bringing Zimbabwe back into the fold

While the CGA may be synonymous with South Africa, Chadwick’s role also caters to members in other parts of southern Africa including Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

The latter will certainly be an industry to watch with new political leadership since long-serving president Robert Mugabe was ousted by his own party late last year.

“With the new government, one of the first things they did was the new Minister of Agriculture called in the whole horticultural sector, indicating indicated the government wanted to support growth in trade and the economy and they saw the horticultural sector as being a driver of that,” Chadwick says.

“They [the government] accepted that they didn’t know much about the sector and that it was the established farmers who should help them lead the way, so there’s definitely a keenness by the government to assist.

“They have already had discussions with China, and there’s quite a lot in the press about the Chinese protocol being finalized for citrus.”

While Chadwick hasn’t yet seen the protocol, he says he imagined growers in the country’s Limpopo area will probably comply fairly quickly with requirements but the process could take longer with citrus farmers in central Zimbabwe.

“Before the land grabs in Zimbabwe the industry there was really taking off. They were at about three million cartons at that point,” he says.

“What happened after the land invasions was that the central areas basically stopped exporting – they couldn’t keep up with the technical requirements to export.

“The guys in the Limpopo area kept on exporting but they didn’t really grow. We find it’s been between 2-3 million cartons since then.”

He said while Zimbabwean growers were members of the CGA, the association didn’t have the same relationship with the country’s government as it did with South African authorities. However, the group has been setting up meetings to ensure Zimbabweans understand the industry, its requirements and biosecurity issues.

Top of the agenda will be discussions of citrus greening or Huanglongbing (HLB) and to a lesser extent CBS.

“One concern is that part of the discussions with China is to bring trees from China into Zimbabwe, and China has HLB citrus greening as well as various other diseases. So that’s one of our engagements with the Zimbabwean government to point out the biosecurity threats of bringing in trees,” Chadwick says.

He says Zimbabwe also has CBS but the remoteness of farms in the Limpopo area meant pest pressures were low.

“But the areas where they haven’t been controlling, they have big issues there.”

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