

SA expects record citrus export crop

Southern Africa's first citrus export forecast of 2018 points to another record volume, despite the drought in some regions

Southern Africa will export some 131.7 million 15kg cartons of citrus fruit during the coming season, representing a 7.1 per cent increase on last year, when a record volume was exported.

The first Southern African forecast of the season confirms the long-term growth trend which will see the region reaching 160m cartons by 2025. The export forecast includes South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.

The South African Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) says it expects good internal quality, normal sizing and good external appearance due to the warm and dry climatic conditions experienced during the summer months.

Soft citrus is expected to increase from 13.4m cartons to 14.7m, grapefruit from 15.6m to 16.8m, lemons from 19m cartons to 20.6m, navels from 21.1 million cartons to 25.6m, while Valencias will remain more or less on the same level as last season when 54m cartons were exported.

The CGA says a good grapefruit crop is expected, with the forecast being eight per cent higher than last year. Pigmented varieties account for the bulk of the export with an expected 14.8m carton crop - eight per cent up on last year. White grapefruit volumes are up two per cent to 1.7m cartons. Swaziland has started selected picking and Zimbabwe starts in week 14, which indicates a normal season.

Valencias contributed by far the biggest proportion of the total citrus export crop. Growers in Letsitele, which accounts for almost a third of the volume, attributed their region's eight per cent anticipated growth to 15.2m cartons to very good growing conditions and recovery from the drought. Typically, a medium-heavy crop in the past has resulted in medium to small fruit. The second largest player, Sunday's River Valley, sees a recovery to seven million cartons in 2018, approaching 2015 levels after two years in the six million cartons range.

The estimated navel export volume represents a return to normal from last year's disastrous 21.1m cartons, says the CGA. The expected exports of 25.58m cartons expected in 2018 is still two per cent down on 2016's volumes. "It is expected that future growth in this commodity will come from late-maturing varieties with early-maturing orchards being taken out," says the CGA.

The rise in the lemon forecast to almost 21m cartons is the first indication of rapid future growth as new orchards come into production. The 20.6m carton estimate is eight per cent up on last year's final volume.

As in the case of lemons, soft citrus' upward trajectory continues, says the CGA. "Overall growth of ten per cent to 14.75m cartons is expected. Growth is driven by the late mandarin types, increasing 19 per cent to 6.6m cartons, while satsumas (seven per cent), clementines (four per cent) and Novas (three per cent) show more modest gains."

