

Harvesting and packing held back by colour development; False Codling Moth Management System could impact on harvest timing

Grapefruit season slow out of the starting blocks

Grapefruit exports from Southern Africa are estimated to increase by around 8% this season, but the trend is yet to be established, with year-to-date volumes substantially lower than in 2017. This year's grapefruit season also has a new dimension: the false codling moth has been a regulated pest in the EU since 1 January 2018, which will bring a change to the shipping protocol.

Reports out of the early growing regions in the northern provinces indicate that colour development has been slower than usual due to climatic conditions. Furthermore, growers are exercising more patience in waiting for the fruit to mature and colour up fully on the tree before harvesting.

In the past, a combination of selective harvesting and shipments at higher temperatures, which allowed for colour development in transit, enabled reasonable volumes of grapefruit to be exported early in the season, as the transition between Northern and Southern Hemisphere suppliers took place. But since the introduction of the False Codling Moth Management System (FMS), neither of these options is viable any longer.



"In 2017, many of the FCM interceptions were made on grapefruit which actually came as a shock to us," says Jan-Louis Pretorius, chair of the Citrus Growers' Association's grapefruit focus group. "In preparation of the 2018 season we've put in an exceptional effort and greatly increased investment into preventative measures to control FCM. Letsitele, for instance, followed an area-wide programme which included a combination of mating disruption, virus and chemical treatments. My expectation is therefore that FCM control in the northern provinces will be the most complete yet."

"Notwithstanding the efforts made to control the pest, the implementation of the FMS may still have a meaningful impact on the grapefruit season. There is a risk that harbours, especially Durban Harbour, could come under pressure as a result of product that moves at a slower pace through the cooling and loading processes," he says. "Furthermore, if there is strong evidence that the risk of FCM from certain areas or on certain varieties is too high, then those areas could lose their access to the EU. It is therefore critical that as producers we do everything in our ability to minimise the risk of incurring FCM interceptions upon arrival in the EU."

Smaller calibres, better quality

Christo Naudé, Malelane Citrus marketing manager, sees firmer fruit of higher quality than last year with a much lower incidence of thrips and wind damage in general. Fruit size is smaller, peaking at around 45/50 but the seven producers who deliver their fruit to Malelane Citrus won't harvest until the beginning of next month.

"We don't pick selectively, so we're waiting for the outside fruit on Star Ruby to get on colour," he says. "It happens some years but it seems like we've had some difficulty with colour for the past three years. It could be because of cooler day temperatures and a number of overcast days, although we didn't get the summer rainfall we were hoping for. Fortunately, we're still able to irrigate as normal."

Around Hoedspruit the grapefruit harvest started a month ago and there, too, colour is coming on slowly. "It's been a very stop-and-start beginning for us," notes Erwee Topham, marketing manager at Alliance Fruit. "There's been much lower volumes at the start than normally but with the nights cooling down as autumn approaches, colour should be coming quickly now."

He notes that fruit is much smaller than last year, with a spread of between 40 and 50 this year, and a lot of 55s and 60s. Star Ruby growing on the inside of trees are larger, and obtain colour quicker in older trees which provide more shade.



Favourable early market reception expected

The price of grapefruit juice is much better than in the past, as global stock has been absorbed and as a result of Hurricane Irma's impact on the Florida citrus industry. This will be an incentive to send grapefruit of marginal counts to local juice factories, keeping them out of the export basket.

Markets are fairly empty, although there's still grapefruit from Spain, Corsica, Turkey and Florida in Europe but it should have cleared by the time of South African product's arrival.

"We think the season will start well," says Nico Kotze, head of marketing and sales at Bonaire Fruit. "A lot depends on the volumes to be shipped within the coming weeks. Early focus has been on the EU and the UK, where demand and prices are looking excellent. We're about ten days later than last year. Our focus will start moving to include the Far East and South East Asia from this week."

Roughly equal amounts had been sent to the EU and UK and to Southeast Asia, primarily Japan, by the end of week 13.

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