

Leading the grapefruit world

Southern Africa is now just about the world's only major grapefruit exporter

South Africa has completed a record grapefruit export season and it has emerged that the country is now just about the only major supplier of grapefruit in the world.

"The curtain is down on the 2018 grapefruit season and it has been a record in terms of volume packed for export," said the Citrus Growers' Association's (CGA) Justin Chadwick.

The country exported 16.4m 17kg cartons (279,000 tonnes), which is more than the 16.1m cartons achieved five years ago in the 2013 season.

This is a remarkable turnaround from a few years ago, when the future of grapefruit as a citrus category in South Africa was questioned due to a drop in demand amongst consumers, mainly in western countries.

"Although the final results in terms of earnings from grapefruit exports will only be known in the new year, anecdotal evidence indicates that it was a difficult marketing year," Chadwick explained.

It appears that the Netherlands remains the largest importer of Southern African grape fruit, with the country receiving some 70,000 tonnes, rising from 63,000 tonnes in 2017.

The nature of the Dutch import trade is such that one can be quite sure that not all of this volume was consumed domestically, but a substantial volume could have been shipped on to other destinations.

South African grapefruit exporters will be buoyed by the news of the rise in exports to China in particular. "This year we shipped 51,000 tonnes to China compared with only 20,000 tonnes in 2017," said Chadwick.

"This catapults China into number two position in terms of Southern African grapefruit exports, with Japan now falling into third spot at 35,000 tonnes," he continued. "Russia, on 17,000 tonnes, and the UK, with 11,000 tonnes complete the top five receivers. Interestingly, grapefruit exports to Hong Kong also increased – from 6,000 tonnes to 9,000 tonnes.

"With this record crop, South Africa remains the number one exporter of grapefruit globally. In the Southern Hemisphere, other citrus producing countries have all but stopped exporting grapefruit, leaving Southern Africa as the sole exporter of any significant volume."

Chadwick noted that the big crop had in some respects caught its Grapefruit Focus Group, responsible for the estimate, off-guard.

"Estimating the 2018 grapefruit crop proved to be challenging for many of the Grapefruit Focus Group members," he added. "The initial estimate was for 14.845m cartons and the final tally is almost 11 per cent over the estimate."

In this respect the harvest in the Limpopo River region was 29 per cent more than the estimate and at Letsitele 26 per cent more than originally anticipated.