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Citrus surge clogs up Durban port

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An uncharacteristic harvesting and production pattern in the citrus sector this year has led to severe congestion at the Port of Durban, according to the Citrus Growers' Association (CGA).

Grapefruit production peaked three weeks late and produced much higher volumes than usual, overlapping with peak production of other citrus fruits such as navels, lemon and soft citrus. And these volumes were also higher than the previous year.

CGA CEO Justin Chadwick said that 1 000 more containers had been shipped this year from Durban compared to the average of the last three years.

"This caused much higher than normal truck arrivals in the Durban port which quickly filled up cold storage capacity causing severe congestion," he said.

CGA Japan Special Exports Coordinator, Faisal Asmal, told FTW Online that over and above the normal congestion at the port, several of these additional trucks had not made a booking.

Bigger volumes have also put a strain on preclearance inspections by the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Daff) and the Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB).

“Daff and PPECB resources have been stretched thin, container equipment has been in short supply, container depot releases have been dire and trucks with Genset units are in short supply,” said Chadwick.

Asmal said that while there were adequate inspectors available, there was a limited timeframe in which to carry out any inspections.

“The port remains operational 24/7 but PPECB will only work until 22h00 while Daff will only work until 20h00 on overtime request, which begins after 16h00,” he said. “In addition to that, some exporters are not willing to budget for the overtime.”

He pointed out that there were several other factors that were exacerbating the congestion at the port including the fact that some exporters were just not shipping on time and had to be called several times to load their shipments. According to Asmal, some fruit has been sitting in the port for around 21 days.

Daff’s Kuben Naidoo told FTW Online that infrastructure availability and overproduction had added to the situation but that no single entity in the value chain was responsible for the congestion.

“DCT Pier 1 and Pier 2 operations have also negatively contributed to the operational challenges as performance has fallen over the last three to four weeks with massive truck delays being encountered,” said Chadwick.

He added that the CGA was currently consulting with all stakeholders on the matter in order to improve operational performance levels for these shipments. He said that Daff was evaluating and addressing the resource constraints to ensure exports were not hindered further this season or in future.

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