

South Africa: Consecutive record citrus crop expected amid lemon, soft citrus uptick

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The South African citrus industry is forecasting its second consecutive record export crop this year, with a pre-season estimate indicating total volumes will rise 0.7% year-on-year to 137 million 15 kg-equivalent cartons.

The overall increase is driven by lemons, which are set to rise 11% year-on-year to 22 million cartons, and soft citrus, up 12% at 18.1 million cartons.

There is also a slight rise expected for Navels, up 0.5% at 26.9 million cartons, and declines for Valencias, which are 3% down at 52.9 million cartons, and grapefruit, down 9% at 15.1 million 17 kg cartons.

Late-maturing mandarin varieties in particular are showing strong growth in plantings and expected exports, which are forecast to be up 19% this season year-on-year.

“The trend in increased exports is expected to continue with production expected to increase dramatically in the next few years,” said the Citrus Growers’ Association’s information manager John Edmonds.

The estimates were released this week at the CGA Summit held in Port Elizabeth.

The CGA’s CEO Justin Chadwick said there was a feeling of “cautious optimism” in the industry ahead of the season.

“The volume is slightly up on last year which shows growth and ample fruit to meet buyers demands,” he said. “The caution is due to market conditions that played out in the main market (EU) for the northern hemisphere citrus season and for southern hemisphere table grapes. In the past table grapes have been a good marker for what will happen with citrus – and that is a bit worrying.”

He added that growing conditions have varied in the country over recent months.

“In the north of the country there have been dry and hot conditions, this was also the case in the Eastern Cape and so there will be some impact,” he said. “The advantage of the wide spread of growing regions is that the southern African region always meets the required volume and quality.”

For soft citrus, both the Boland and Patensie regions expect their harvesting to be a week earlier than last year, according to Edmonds. He added that Western Cape Valencias would start around week 30, in contrast to last year’s late start in week 35 due to acid levels.

As for market conditions, Chadwick expected there would be good competition in the market this season.

“It is no secret that the increase in planted area of citrus in the southern African region is also experienced in other southern hemisphere countries,” he said.

Unfortunately for South Africa, despite indications in June last year that U.S. authorities would grant citrus imports from all South African regions ahead of this season, the rule has not yet been finalized.

“The final rule is stuck in the political landscape in the U.S., and previous assurances from high ranking officials in the US have not been honored. It is essential that this rule be finalized without further delay,” Chadwick said.

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