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Co-loading success for RSA citrus

More shipments of South African citrus to be co-loaded for Japan and China this year



It's not easy to discuss prospects for South African citrus in Asia this year without getting embroiled in the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. However, with an excellent crop in the country's orchards, there are carefully laid plans to make the most of it.

The industry is looking to replicate last year's success with co-loading its vessels to Japan and China when the new export season gets underway.

South Africa is projecting a record packout of around 143m cartons of citrus in 2020, which would be 13 per cent more than last year. Key to the success of marketing this crop will be the Chinese and Japanese markets. Japan is an important grapefruit market for South Africa, while China is a rapidly emerging consumer market for a range of South African citrus lines, with exporters witnessing spectacular growth there over the past few years.

Changing logistics to ensure that both markets are supplied optimally from early in the season proved to be very successful last year.

"We are confident that we can expand this reefer programme this year," said Mitchel Brooke, logistics development manager at the Citrus Growers' Association of South Africa (CGA). "We will expand the co-loading programme to seven vessels this year."

Fruit destined for Japan and China will be loaded at the Port of Durban. The vessels will first off-load in Japan before travelling to China.

Speaking with Asiafruit in late-March, Brooke said it was too early to comment definitively on how the season will develop.

"We hope that our first vessel will sail in mid-April, with the others following at regular intervals," he explained. "The forecast suggests we will have a busy season, which we have planned for."

It is not certain what impact coronavirus will have on the upcoming season, nor its long-term implications for South Africa's citrus industry. It is therefore far easier for stakeholders to talk about the upcoming crop and changes in the various categories.

"We have an excellent crop and growers are reporting clean fruit, good sizing and quality from across the country. It is now a matter of what happens off the farm, in the logistics chain and in the markets," said CGA's John Edmonds.

The respective volumes of soft citrus and lemons grown in South Africa could increase by more than 20 per cent year-on-year in 2020. Grapefruit will be up by 14 per cent compared to last year, but still down on the previous year's exports.

In soft citrus, there is continued production growth in late mandarin types, while growers are increasing investments in orchards of late navel varieties. One of these is the Cumbria navel.

Sources say early navels are becoming less attractive to growers because they compete with late Valencia oranges from the Northern Hemisphere.

This is an abbreviated version of an article that appears in Asiafruit April 2020.