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South African lockdown extended

Covid-19 lockdown now in place until end of April, while lemon shipments make an early start

The South African fresh produce export industry is facing up to an extension of the national lockdown until at least the end of April to fight the spread of Covid-19.

The original lockdown would have expired on Thursday 16 April, and observers have said the early announcement of the extension indicated a determination by the government to act decisively to combat the pandemic.

In fact, since the Covid-19 crisis started, the approval rating of the president, Cyril Ramaposa, has soared after a period when the country questioned his policies and lack of decisive action to right the ailing economy.

In terms of harvesting, the stonefruit and table grape sectors have completed their seasons, and they therefore do not need to contend with the problems that large numbers of outside workers will create on their farms and in packhouses.

The apple and pear industry will complete their harvesting by the end of April.

For citrus, however, it is only the start of the season and it is here where lemons have made an early start this year, both in harvesting and exporting.

The Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) has said that that with many packhouses delaying the startup of grapefruit and orange operations until after easter, and in some cases after the original lockdown date to prevent disruptions, lemon harvesting and packing has taken the lead.

"Lemons shipped to date total 3.7m cartons, which is more than double the 2019 volumes at the same time of the season," the association said. "The bulk of these shipments (66 per cent) have been to the Middle East, compared with 37 per cent of the total at the same time of the season last year."

Lemon shipments to Russia increased from 9 per cent to 13 per cent, CGA noted, southeast Asian shipments remained consistent at 11 per cent, while European shipments dropped from 28 per cent to 5 per cent. Early shipments of soft citrus and lemons are more or less at the same level as the previous season.

The CGA board has formed a Covid-19 Response Committee to ensure that the citrus industry meets its responsibility and uses its privileged position as an essential service provider wisely.

This committee will consider different scenarios, and within each scenario consider impacts on the industry in terms of inputs and services, workers, operations and markets. The idea is to be proactive in positioning the industry to meet future challenges.

With peak shipments of apples and pears coming into full swing after easter, and the citrus packing and shipping gearing up for the peak months of May and June, observers expect the South African export industry to face some challenges.

