

South African lemons a hair's breadth away from better China access



At this point, South African lemon exports stand at over 25,7 million cartons (15kg equivalent), a surge of more than 5 million cartons from last year's total.

Of that, only around 175,000 cartons went to South East Asia, 7% of the whole volume of South African lemons.

And of that, China takes a paltry amount, and it's getting less every year: 10,114 15kg equivalent cartons this year, sent, according to the cold steri protocol between South Africa and China, at -0.5°C.

Last year South Africa sent almost 15,000 cartons, the year before that 23,300 cartons.

Lemon exports to China are dwindling while the South African lemon crop is shooting in the opposite direction.

The reason for the reduction in lemons to China is the cold damage suffered by the fruit at -0.5°C , a fact that has become abundantly clear since the protocol's introduction in 2004.

"I have not heard of any arrivals in China at that temperature that have been fine in recent years," says a lemon exporter. "What I have heard of, are astronomical losses – even losing 100% of a lemon consignment."

Covid-19 delays signing off of revised protocol

South Africa five years ago initiated the process to amend the shipping protocol to 18 days at 3°C , a temperature at which, previous trials have shown, lemons are not damaged.

The amendment has been accepted by both sides – but then Covid-19 delayed the signing in Beijing in March.

There were hopes for trial shipments at this revised temperature already this season, but those plans were also scuppered.

There is good demand for lemons in China, where Argentina and Chile are South Africa's main lemon competitors. Strong growth is expected once South African lemons can be sent to China, free from the risk of cold damage.

Publication date: Thu 22 Oct 2020

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