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Japan welcomes RSA grapefruit

First South African citrus of the season has been well received in the Far East

Early South African Marsh grapefruit shipments to Japan have now been supplemented by the arrival of the first conventional vessels of the season.

Logistics service providers said the early container shipments were particularly successful and exporters who got into the market early did extremely well.

The first conventional vessel left Durban at the end of April and was the first of a number of these ships co-loaded for Japan and China.

By all accounts, the South African citrus industry has benefited from increased demand for fruit, and specifically citrus, due to the focus on boosting immune systems in the light of the Covid-9 pandemic.

It is also clear that the industry was able to start shipping earlier this year, with 21.4m cartons of all categories shipped so far compared with 14.5m cartons at the same time last year.

The export forecast is now 142.5m cartons after both the lemon and Valencia forecasts were adjusted upwards last week.

The forecast shows that exports of soft citrus, lemons and navels will be significantly higher than last year, while Valencias will be more or less the same and grapefruit significantly down.

South Africa moved to lockdown level 3 today, with more sectors of the economy being opened up. Industry leaders have cautioned growers to remain vigilant, with work places being maintained as the safest places for workers to be.

"Most believe that the opening up of other sectors and relaxation of various rules will result in increased positive tests; putting more pressure on government from those who criticise the move to Level 3," said the CGA's Justin Chadwick. "More people will get sick – it is important to minimise the chances that those people are your workers. Minimise the possibility that if your workers do get sick, it was not at the work place."

With shipments to most destinations seemingly running smoothly, there are concerns about efficiencies in some of the ports.

This is particularly true in the case of Cape Town Container Terminal. The latest CGA logistics report states that the terminal continues with reduced staff and limited night shift operations.

"The increase in Covid-19 cases forced the terminal to announce Force Majeure, effective immediately," the report stated. The industry was warned that additional rules would apply to vessels arriving in ports limits from today (1 June).

"Vessels arriving first, will be served first with the berthing window suspended. Vessel Berthing delays continues to be high at delays of more than 8.5 days on average."

Observers have said that in the light of the national emergency the Port Authority, by declaring Force Majeure, wants to limit exposure to insurance claims because of the present situation.

From what can be established, the US citrus programme is running smoothly from the old fruit terminal at Fresh Produce Terminals.

Logistics observers said container vessels were also increasingly loading in this section of the port, which is shielded from the high winds often causing delays at the Container Terminal.

Last week a container vessel which had a fire in its hold further complicated matters in Cape Town.

The Cosco vessel, MV Sao Paulo, arrived from Durban 8 days ago and was due to continue to the Far East.

Port officials and insurers were reportedly assessing the damage after the fire was finally contained after the vessel arrived at the terminal. There is no indication when the vessel will again be able to sail.