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Sour note for citrus exports part of global trend

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South Africa's citrus exporters are not alone in facing challenges of shipping their goods to market.

Exporters are struggling to move their citrus through the Port of Durban due to a combination of Transnet inefficiencies and fewer vessel calls.

Limited shipping capacity is one of the biggest challenges facing global trade in fruit and vegetables, according to Thomas Wang, spokesperson for Shenzhen Cool Chain Logistics.

Writing for *Fresh Plaza*, he says a number of Chinese importers shift their focus to premium domestic fruit instead.

Imported fruit used to account for about 70%-80% of high-end supermarket fruit in first-tier cities, but it has dropped to about 30%-40% in 2021, according to Wang.

Retailers are sourcing locally to avoid the risks associated with equipment shortages, delays, quarantines, and rising freight rates.

For some commodities it costs more to ship a container than the value of the fruit or vegetables inside it.

On the plus side, Covid-19 presents opportunities for exporters of quality fruit and vegetables, according to Mike Knowles, editorial director of *Fruitnet Media International*.

In a special report on the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the international fresh produce business, Knowles says there is no doubt that consumers in many markets are showing more interest in healthy food.

“The importance of fruit and vegetables to consumers and buyers is on the rise.

“This is a very good thing, and a wonderful chance for the business.”

The challenge is to keep a lid on food inflation.

“Supply chains are coming under greater pressure as a result of the economic downturn and the increased cost of growing fruit and vegetables, harvesting those products, and delivering them safely and securely to market,” he writes.

The report points out that earnings by fresh fruit and vegetable producers have remained strong during the worst of the pandemic.

A survey of its membership by the Southern Hemisphere Association of Fresh Fruit Exporters (Shaffe) found that total export volumes across members in 2020 fell by 3.4%.

However, the total value of exports increased by 6.4%, from US$14.7m to US$15.7m.

Rising logistics costs are seen as the biggest challenge to exporters.

Technology could provide some of the answers to new logistics challenges, with more sustainable and more traceable supply chains likely to be at a clear advantage in the new post-pandemic global market.

“The key words will be sustainability and blockchain,” Linda Carobbi, corporate director, fresh fruit vertical market, at Florence-based logistics specialist Savino Del Bene is quoted as saying.

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