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Citrus industry heading for record-breaking export season

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The South African citrus industry is likely to break all previous export season records with an estimated 158.7 million cartons in 2021.

That's the word from Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) CEO Justin Chadwick who says that if the estimate is reached, it would represent a third consecutive season of record export volumes, with 130 million cartons exported in 2019, followed by 146 million cartons in 2020.

"Our current projections for 2021 indicate a 22% growth in export figures in just two years," says Chadwick.

Eswatini and Zimbabwe combined have also increased their export figures from 3.9 million cartons in 2020, to an estimated 4.4 million cartons in 2021 – an increase of 13%, bringing the total southern African volume to be exported through our ports to more than 163 million cartons.

Navel oranges and lemons have shown a small increase since last year, while Valencia oranges (5%) and grapefruit (16%) have shown stronger growth. Soft citrus-producing regions are projected to show the most significant growth, with an estimated 30.5 million cartons for export in 2021, 29% up on last year.

“The late mandarin varieties in particular stand out within the soft citrus category,” says Chadwick, “with an expected growth of 42% this year.”

That being said, the Soft Citrus Focus Group chairperson has cautioned that these estimates may be adjusted downwards once the season gets under way, as the continued drought in the Eastern Cape and exceedingly wet conditions in the northern growing regions may affect export volumes negatively.

Medium-term crop estimates indicate that the citrus industry is expected to continue increasing its exports by another 300 000 tons over the next three years. “The growth projections for soft citrus, lemons and Valencia oranges alone indicate an expected additional R6.8 billion in foreign exchange earnings and the creation of 22 250 sustainable jobs over the next three years,” adds Chadwick.

“These figures indicate phenomenal growth within the South African citrus industry, and for our local economy. The demand for our produce overseas is a wonderful testament to the quality of South Africa’s citrus fruit. There is no doubt that citrus growers are investing heavily for the future, with more than R1 billion in grower levies over the next four years going into research and technology to support market access and transformation, while creating an enabling logistics environment to move the fruit.”

To maximise the potential of the citrus industry as a South African export, the industry will need government and other stakeholders to play their part, Chadwick says. “For example, we will be relying heavily on the efficiency of our ports in order to successfully ship the additional 13 million cartons estimated for this year alone. We will also need to work hand-in-hand with government to secure, maintain and retain as many market access opportunities as possible. Optimising access conditions will be essential for the continued growth of our industry.”