

Sundays River Valley Citrus Producer Forum reacts to violence

By [Fred Meintjes](#) | 4 May 2022

Producers in the Sundays River Valley say violence and destruction of property harms economic development and opportunities for all

The Sundays River Valley Citrus Producer Forum (SRVCPF) has responded to the demands and grievances made by SANCO in a petition handed over last week.

The violent protests on citrus producing farms in the region last week caused damages of more than R70m to property, infrastructure and packhouses. Furthermore, R100m of fruit due to be exported was lost.

The Forum said it was important to note that service delivery did not form part of the demands and grievances.

“The Growers Forum, through levies paid per export carton by producers, have used these funds to maintain and upgrade these services in the communities of the Sundays River Valley since 2018,” it noted.

Members of the forum had met with various stakeholders throughout the course of last week to try to resolve the current situation in the area, which remains tense with many continuing to stay away from work.

“It is unfortunate, that many employees wishing to return to work remain intimidated by factions of protestors, which is placing the entire local citrus sector at risk and the thousands of livelihoods it supports,” the Forum noted.

“The damages incurred last week alone have been particularly devastating, given that over the past number of years, relationships between community, employers and employees in the valley have been harmonious,” said Dr Hennie Ehlers, chairman of the Forum.

“This follows the establishment of a collaborative in 2018, which created a safe space through which social issues could be addressed in a lawful and procedural manner,” Ehlers continued.

“It was agreed that any disputes would follow the recognised labour dispute resolution structures created for such scenarios. All citrus industry employers are bound to pay minimum wage. Despite the gazette minimum, employers, independently and separately, and their employees, agree on wages in the workplace and any disputes are referred to the CCMA.”

EUROFRUIT current wave of violent and destructive protest action would have a compounding effect on the sustainability of citrus farms in the region, which are already under immense financial pressure due to rising inputs costs (including electricity, fertiliser and soaring freight rates).

These are aggravated further by the inefficiency of the country's ports, global supply chain crises and the war in Ukraine.

"It is possible that a high percentage of growers may not survive in the future and will certainly not be profitable in 2022," Ehlers said. "This bears a significant impact on local communities, given that our citrus growers are the largest employers in the region."

Given the above and the continued financial pressure on the citrus industry nationally, especially in the Sundays River Valley, members of the Growers Forum are simply not able to increase minimum wages but remain committed to paying the legislated minimum wage of R23.19.

It is also worth noting that a vast majority of employees earn more than the minimum wage, due to a range of other incentives that have been introduced by farmers in the area.

Ehlers added that the Forum and its members, despite respectfully declining the demand for an increased minimum wage and committing to pay the gazetted minimum, remained available to meet to discuss any realistic requests regarding the upliftment and improvement of conditions of community members of the Sundays River Valley.

