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Exporters warned to prepare for port delay replay

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2022 is likely to see a replay of last year's serious port disruptions – and exporters have been warned to be aware and be prepared.

Citrus Growers' Association CEO Justin Chadwick has advised stakeholders in his weekly newsletter that the performance of South African container terminals is well below international norms or acceptable levels.

“Equipment challenges, coupled with weather delays and the fact that hundreds of key personnel have left Transnet after being offered a voluntary severance package, have seen performance continue to deteriorate, resulting in extended shipping delays.”

At the height of last year's port congestion crisis, ships were spending days or weeks before calling ports – and in some cases months on the coast before finally departing South Africa after completing the full port rotation.

This led some shipping lines to pull services from some ports, and in many cases, omit SA ports due to the severity of the delays.

As a result there were massive bottlenecks and congestion at the port's cold stores.

CGA logistics development manager, Mitchell Brooke, has been an outspoken industry voice, never mincing his words – and warning that the poor state of Transnet's operations is seriously compromising the South African agriculture and manufacturing industries, posing a huge threat to the local economy.

There's no doubt that port operations in 2022 will be constrained.

"The necessary resources to bring about the needed improvement in efficiency will take some time to come to fruition," said Chadwick.

"2021 was an annus horribilis for the southern African citrus industry – with many stating that they had never experienced such a horrible year.

"The challenges experienced last year during the citrus season continued throughout the table grape season – which is why exporters need a thorough and well-developed logistics plan for 2022," he said.

"Once this good plan is developed, exporters will need to keep their ear to the ground to ensure they are aware of events that impact on the plan – and be prepared to adapt to these changes.

"One thing we learnt in 2021 was to expect the unexpected – hopefully in 2022 this does not include an insurrection or a cyberattack – but who knows what will be thrown at us?" CGA would engage daily with the port operator on operational issues, and feed through information/intelligence as it gets known, he said.

"We will encourage and support the port operator wherever possible.

"In this way the thousands of logistics decisions made on a daily basis will be informed decisions, and we can get to not only export the big volume anticipated for 2022, but export it timeously and in line with marketing plans."

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