BUSINESS

Light at the end of the funnel as port equipment steams towards Cape Town

Rubber tyre gantries due to arrive in time for export season

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Bobby Jordan
Senior reporter

Ships at anchor outside Cape Town port last week.
***Image**: Andre Jurgens*

Cape Town faces a race against time to fix its port infrastructure before an expanded export bonanza due to a bumper fruit crop.

With containers stacking up outside ports, fruit exporters will require more capacity, both vessels and port infrastructure, to handle outgoing cargo during peak fruit export season at the beginning of next year.

Cape Town's historic congestion issues relate partly to wind — container movements are impossible during gale force conditions — and are partly due to a lack of operational rubber tyre gantries needed to move containers within the port. There are also efforts to bolster container throughput by extending working hours to move more at night.

However, private sector stakeholders have secured a reprieve in the form of seven second-hand rubber tyre gantries (RTGs) which are arriving from the US to be operational from December 1, said Exports Club Western Cape chair Terry Gale. The incoming equipment means the port will again have 25 to 30 working RTGs, the number required to handle container traffic, said Gale.

The port also relies on nine ship-to-shore gantries (STSs) that load containers off vessels onto the quayside — eight fully operational ones for the three-berth operation and one on standby. Two had operational issues that have since been resolved.

“All eight gantries are fully operational and there are no berthing delays,” Gale said.

He suggested the city may benefit from a recently announced shipping route shake-up in which Cape Town-bound cargo will be trans-shipped in Mauritius because incoming cargo would circumvent lengthy stopover delays in Durban.

“It's definitely not looking too bad from an export point of view, but imports are a big concern,” Gale said.

Business stakeholders are still concerned about fruit exports, with the January/February crop expected to require additional port capacity. About 55% of agriculture exports come from the Western Cape. Business has convened urgent behind-the-scenes talks with port authorities in recent months to address infrastructure and efficiency issues. The Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry is leading the charge for a Western Cape Logistics Cluster that could intervene to resolve the crisis and prevent it potentially reaching Durban's proportions, where about 50 ships are stuck outside the port due to a container bottleneck.

Western Cape premier Alan Winde recently lambasted Transnet for underinvestment in the port.

“We have an opportunity to grow exports through the port and create more jobs, yet Transnet cannot seem to get its affairs in order, so critical logistics hubs are suffering from underinvestment. We will intensify pressure on national government to prioritise the [port],” he said earlier this month after a provincial cabinet meeting.

The provincial government has engaged directly with the Citrus Growers Association to address concerns about port congestion ahead of export season and has scheduled a December 4 meeting with Western Cape exporter stakeholders.