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Zimbabwe horticulture sector sees green shoots despite challenges

The sector aims to attract investment of \$1.2bn but it's uphill task amid policy changes, logistics challenges and persistent concerns over land tenure

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Workers unpack avocados at a fruit and vegetable shop in Harare, Zimbabwe, October 17 2017. Picture: PHILIMON BULAWAYO/REUTERS

Zimbabwe's horticultural sector, ravaged by violent land seizures 20 years ago, is recovering thanks to increased investment and is targeting \$1bn in exports by 2030, an industry body said on Thursday.

The country's horticultural exports peaked at \$140m in 1999, before former president Robert Mugabe championed the seizure of white-owned farms. The land seizures disrupted Zimbabwe's agriculture-driven economy, triggering food shortages and a lengthy economic crisis marked by hyperinflation in 2008.

Zimbabwe is now earning \$120m annually from exports of horticultural products including citrus, flowers, tea, avocados, blueberries and macadamia nuts, according to the Horticultural Development Council (HDC).

“We have to grow 10 times to reach this goal and obviously it calls for rapid expansion in the sector,” HDC vice-president Linda Nielsen told a horticultural conference in Harare.

The targeted growth would require \$1.2bn of investment, according to the HDC, an uphill task for a sector struggling with an inconsistent policy and regulatory environment, high borrowing costs, logistics challenges and persistent concerns over land tenure.

Increasing investment in products such as blueberries and macadamia nuts, whose global demand has surged in recent years, is helping traditional products such as citrus, tea and flowers to drive the rebound.

“We see a revival of up to 10,000ha (of citrus plantations) by 2030. Most of it was lost to land reform,” Citrus Growers Association president Pete Breinstein said at the conference.

Zimbabwe’s government under President Emmerson Mnangagwa has sought to improve relations with white farmers and is supporting the revival of agriculture, including providing funding.

The EU, a major market for Zimbabwe’s horticultural exports, is also providing technical support and funding through the European Investment Bank.

“We believe we can get there, provided there is an enabling environment and user-friendly financing,” HDC president Stanley Heri said.

Reuters