

CRI research ensures sustainable future for southern Africa's citrus industry

Citrus Research International (CRI) and its partners are advancing research to protect southern Africa's citrus industry from diseases and pests. This research supports the industry, which contributes about R30bn annually to the South African economy and employs 140,000 people. Effective research is crucial for maintaining industry stability and access to export markets.



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The 12th Citrus Research Symposium, hosted by CRI from 19-21 August in the Central Drakensberg, reaffirmed support for plant health vigilance. As one of South Africa's largest agricultural conferences, it attracted 850 delegates, including citrus growers, packhouses, exporters, international researchers, and industry partners.

Cooperation key to citrus success

"The cooperation between the role-players that attended the symposium is essential in keeping southern Africa's citrus safe and in demand across the globe," explained Justin Chadwick, CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA). "Our industry has a history of keeping the laboratory and the orchards in touch, not just through events like this one, but through continual exchanges."



WTO cases against EU citrus measures move forward

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Currently, the South African government is involved in two historic trade disputes at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) regarding the European Union's citrus import regulations. The cases concern False Codling Moth (FCM) and Citrus Black Spot (CBS), both having been the subject of extensive research to enable effective control.

At the symposium, new research results on FCM were presented by researchers, including a novel FCM detection technique using the analysis of scent, as well as the fine-tuning of postharvest treatments of fruit to eliminate the presence of any surviving FCM larvae.

Highlights on CBS research included a new matrix for CBS risk assessment of individual orchards that can assist growers, while another study identified naturally antifungal compounds in citrus rinds which could become part of an environmentally sustainable remedy for CBS.

Economic imperative

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"Information on plant diseases and pests might seem highly technical or obscure, but when you know that so many jobs and income depend on keeping citrus healthy, then it places it all in context," said Dr Aruna Manrakhan, research entomologist at the CRI. "For instance, at the symposium, a researcher calculated that it costs the citrus industry R386 million per year to counter the fruit fly. Always improving is an economic imperative."

Another topic of keen discussion at the symposium was Huanglongbing (HLB) also known as Asian Citrus Greening. Southern Africa is completely free from the disease, but it has recently devastated citrus industries in some other major citrus production regions in the world, such as Florida.

Details of the CRI's partnership with the University of Florida on HLB-resistant rootstock were also presented at the symposium. "Breeding disease-resistant rootstocks takes time, but research on HLB resistance is looking promising. South Africa has time to prepare methods that can successfully avoid the HLB nightmare that has taken place in other countries and maintain production of export quality fruit," said Dr Paul Cronjé, citriculture portfolio manager at CRI.

Working alongside the South African government to bolster biosecurity and market access is an important priority for CRI, together with enabling citrus growers to sustainably provide top-quality citrus fruit to consumers around the world. The CRI currently funds and coordinates 131 active

research projects and operates a wide-ranging research partnership model that encompasses 22 local and international research collaborations.

"We export to over 100 countries, and when consumers are enjoying South African citrus' superior quality and taste, they don't think of the enormous network of important role-players and events like the symposium, or the workshops, study groups, courses and other technology transfer channels," said Hannes Bester, national extension manager at CRI. "We give consumers a great product, and at events like this we take pride in the dedicated efforts of all role-players."

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