South African citrus report a decline in exports after unusual year

The South African Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) reported that this year, citrus growers packed 164.5 million 15kg cartons for global delivery, 600,000 cartons less than last year.

Justin Chadwick, the organization's CEO, said the slight decline is still a strong performance for the sector given the truly unique and demanding circumstances growers faced. It's estimated that a total of 10.1 million cartons were diverted to local juicing or lost due to weather events.

According to the CGA, citrus growers faced several unforeseen factors and had to adjust their export estimates regularly throughout the year.

The initial estimate for total exports was 181.7 million 15kg cartons, but the final figure fell 9% short of this.

One of the most prominent factors affecting export volumes was the high price offered for oranges destined for local processing.

Precious Kunota, Business Intelligence & Data Manager at the CGA, explained: "Sources in the juice industry reported a significant increase of between 60% to 80% in volumes of oranges processed at their facilities, compared to the 2023 season."

It is estimated that about 6 million 15kg cartons of oranges—7% of the total crop destined for export—were diverted to juice plants.

Abnormally hot and dry conditions during the mid-to-late summer period also affected citrus exports by leading to smaller fruit sizes. This meant that approximately 4% more fruit were required to fill the same number of cartons compared to the previous year.

Three severe weather events further impacted exports. Freezing temperatures in Limpopo, floods in the Western Cape (Citrusdal), and strong winds in the Eastern Cape caused fruit to drop, reducing the amount of citrus packed for global markets.

Despite the slight decline in export numbers from 2023, the total amount of citrus produced in South Africa continues to grow.

Chadwick expressed confidence in the industry's long-term growth goals, saying that if all role players come together, the CGA’s target of exporting 260 million cartons and creating 100,000 jobs by 2032 is achievable.

Final Packed Figures

This year, 14.3 million cartons (15kg equivalent) of grapefruit were packed for export, 300,000 fewer than in the 2023 season and a 14% shortfall from the initial estimates made in April 2024.

Mandarins saw a significant increase, with 41.6 million cartons packed—a notable 3.6 million more than the previous season but 3% less than the initial estimate.

Lemons showed a decrease compared to both the previous season and the estimate: 34.7 million cartons were packed in 2024, down 9% from the estimate and 1.1 million cartons compared to 2023.

Navel oranges packed for export showed an increase of 400,000 cartons compared to 2023, with 25.1 million cartons packed this year. However, this figure represents a 2% decrease from the original estimate.

Valencia oranges totaled 48.7 million cartons this year, 4.7 million fewer than in 2023 and a significant 16% shortfall from the initial estimates.

Challenges and Future Outlook

Port efficiency remained a serious concern for the citrus industry during the past season. Chadwick noted that the lower-than-expected citrus export volumes eased pressure on container terminals, reducing peak volumes at ports.

He warned, however, that volumes are expected to increase over the next few seasons, and if port infrastructure is not improved to handle this growth, both citrus exports and the wider economy will suffer.

"The CGA is of the strong opinion that more public-private partnerships are needed urgently. Although the partnership between Transnet and International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI) on Durban Pier 2 has been delayed because of legal matters, there must be a renewed urgency to improve container terminals and unlock the economic potential of our ports," said Mitchell Brooke, the CGA's Logistics Development Manager.

The European Union's "unscientific and unnecessarily restrictive" trade measures on Citrus Black Spot (CBS) and False Coddling Moth (FCM) continued to dampen exports. According to the CGA, these measures represent an opportunity cost of R3.7 billion for local growers.

South Africa’s historic cases against these trade measures at the World Trade Organization are progressing and are set to enter the next phase in the dispute process in mid-December.