

Citrus industry faces hurdles as export volumes fall

By Octavia Avesca Spandiel | 29 November 2024 | 7:15 am

South Africa's citrus industry experienced an unexpected dip in export volumes this year, presenting growers with significant challenges related to climate, market demands, and logistics. The Citrus Growers Association (CGA) has stepped in to address these issues, supporting farmers as they navigate a tough season.



Exporting South Africa's high-quality citrus remains a priority, with new opportunities being pursued in China and India.

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Climate challenges and market pressures

Speaking to *Farmer's Weekly*, Justin Chadwick, CEO of the CGA, said this season's lower-than-anticipated export figures were due to increasingly unpredictable climate-related disruptions.

"We can't control the weather, but we're committed to providing growers with the tools to adapt," he said.

According to Chadwick, the CGA promotes sustainable farming practices as a long-term solution to climate challenges. Nearly half of South Africa's citrus farms now use solar power, reducing reliance on the grid. Other methods, such as mulching, which improves soil health and reduces pesticide needs, are also becoming more common.

However, these solutions come at a cost. "Installing solar power to offset 30% of a farm's energy needs requires an investment of around R2 million. While beneficial, the financial impact cannot be ignored," Chadwick said.

He added that market demands had further compounded the year's difficulties. Disparate sustainability standards across global markets have also created inefficiencies.



"We're working with banks and agricultural partners to align sustainability metrics and reduce duplication," Chadwick said.

Logistical setbacks at ports

Logistical issues at South African ports have worsened the situation for exporters. Chadwick said there was an urgent need for improved efficiency through public-private partnerships.

"The delays in the Transnet-ICTSI deal at Durban Pier 2 are frustrating. More private involvement in container terminals is critical to unlocking economic growth and creating jobs," he said.

With export volumes set to increase in the coming years due to recent plantings, resolving these bottlenecks is more important than ever.

Balancing domestic and export needs

The rise in local processing of citrus, particularly for juice, has also shifted dynamics. While this has provided growers with an alternative market, Chadwick cautioned against overreliance.

"Juice prices are favourable now, but there's no guarantee this will last. Exporting fresh citrus remains a priority, as global markets value the quality and taste of South African fruit," he said.

The CGA is actively pursuing new export opportunities in Asia, particularly in China and India, to ensure that increased production can be absorbed by international markets. "Expanding market access is vital to keeping our growers competitive," Chadwick said.

Focus on sustainability

Chadwick said sustainability had emerged as a key focus for the industry this year, with the CGA driving initiatives to help farmers adapt to climate change. From supporting responsible water use through drip irrigation to promoting the SIZA Environmental Standard, the association is committed to long-term solutions.

"These measures improve resource efficiency, but they're expensive, and growers must balance sustainability with profitability," Chadwick said.

Despite the unexpected challenges of 2023, the CGA remains optimistic. "This season has highlighted areas for improvement. With strategic partnerships and innovation, we're ready to move forward stronger," Chadwick said.