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“Unusual start to South Africa’s 2024 citrus season”

South Africa's 2024 citrus season is slowly starting in a bit of an unusual way, with producers struggling to get a grip on volume in terms of sizing. This comes after very hot conditions during the growing period at the end of last year. However, with some rain coming, the sizing situation can change drastically says Justin Chadwick, CEO of the Citrus Growers Association (CGA): "There's a lot of uncertainty because we had very hot conditions over the growing period of November and December with early spring rains. It is an unusual season, producers are battling to get a grip on volume in terms of sizing. If there's a bit of rain, the situation can change. If the fruit drops one count, they can lose 10% of the fruit, that can have a big influence on the volume."

Photo by Lucentlands: A citrus orchard in South Africa.

He says while they have issued the first estimate for the season, their CGA estimates have been accurate in the past. "There's a lot of uncertainties. As we pack we'll have a better idea towards the end of April and the end of May we'll have an even better idea. It's very early, packing started in earnest after Easter. At the beginning of the year, we start with lemons, and have already packed over three million cartons for the year. Grapefruit is next to ramp up, we're starting to get going now. Then on to Satsumas, Clementines, then they start with Navals very soon and later to Valencias."

Port and logistics challenges remain

South Africa's port and logistics challenges remain. There is a glimmer of hope with the new Transnet CEO Michelle Phillips and her team. Private sector participation in the ports to help government is there, but will be stalled in court action. "We have full faith in Michelle Phillips and the team she's getting in there, with the right support and funding we should see an improvement in the ports. It is really important to stay on it with Mitchell Brook from the CGA who is on a daily call with Transnet."

New and expanding market access

The Vietnam market just opened in time for South Africa's 2024 season. Chadwick says while volumes will not be big, they will grow in this new market. "We just got Vietnam, while we will not have huge volume initially, it will grow as networks improve and exporters set up channels we will see volume start to go up. India is crucial for us too. While we're not allowed to do in transit cold treatment, we see huge potential there with good work done together with our Department of Agriculture and the PPECB. In the US we only have access for Western and Northern Cape citrus. We hope the rest of South Africa's production areas should get access too for the different categories. Japan only allows Clementines into that market. They are not allowing us to export our later mandarins with production numbers that are really increasing. Our aim is optimising existing market access there."

The CGA's key message on behalf of Southern African producers and exporters is that there will be plenty of fruit to supply all markets. "There's enough fruit to supply to all markets that need the fruit. It looks like a good quality year. We'll have to see the sizing as we go into the year, it should be improving. We will work very closely with logistics providers to ensure timeous delivery into the market. We will make sure we comply with phytosanitary regulations, even where we don't agree with it. We look forward to seeing the growth that was anticipated in our Vision 360," concludes Chadwick.

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