

Various other weather-related quality issues affect South Africa's citrus crop

Juice bonanza softens the blow of heavy navel creasing

"We're inundated with oranges," says the general manager of a juice processor, "a tremendous amount of oranges: we're working seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and still we're sitting with stock. The price won't be affected, though, because it's still only a drop in the ocean. World demand for orange juice is like a swimming pool, and we're adding five litres: it will help, but not an awful lot."

By the middle of last year, the price of orange juice concentrate started climbing, in response to the drop in the Brazilian orange crop for processing. Juice prices have never competed this strongly with export prices on South African oranges and looking around for alternatives, some buyers have turned to the juice of soft citrus.

"Soft citrus juice prices have also improved, and we're grateful for every truck arriving here carrying soft citrus," he says. Novas work really well, better than clementines, and class 2 late mandarins are also sent to the juice factory this season.

Orange creasing



"Thank goodness for the juice price – it's been a lifeline for us," says an Eastern Cape citrus exporter who asks not to be named. The incidence of creasing on navels is high this season on fruit from the Sundays River Valley in the Eastern Cape and in the Western Cape, in the Boland and Citrusdal, but not to the same extent on every farm.

The Gamtoos and Kat River valleys of the Eastern Cape are less prone to creasing than the Sundays River Valley, although even there it's slightly more prevalent in some blocks than usual.

An exporter of Western Cape citrus, similarly requesting anonymity, says it's much too early to predict the impact of creasing on the Cape's orange crop, which is running two to two and a half weeks behind schedule.

There is mention of creasing on Turkey Valencias from northern South Africa, but Eastern Cape navels are most affected by the physiological condition.

Dr Paul Cronjé of Citrus Research International confirms the higher incidence of creasing this year; the degree of creasing determines whether it can be exported. Creasing – distinct from splitting – affects all orange types, with navels most sensitive. (He remarks he's never seen creasing on grapefruit.)

It is the result of a calcium shortage during peel development, Dr Cronjé explains. When it's very hot and dry, not enough of the mineral is sometimes sent to the peel and later in the season, from March onwards, when the fruit increases in size, the crease is pulled apart and becomes prominent. Sometimes it happens

when there are too many fruit on the tree, he says, aiming at 60 tonnes per hectare where 50 tonnes would have been better.

The eating quality of fruit with creasing is not affected, he points out, but the peel isn't as strong and at risk of giving way under pressure during transport in the pallet. Some farmers have decided, given the juice price, to divert entire affected navel blocks to juicing.



Maturation challenges on lower orange crop

Creasing becomes more pronounced the longer the fruit must hang to develop colour. "Poor colour and sizing are symptoms of adverse weather: it was too hot during flowering, and now we're sitting with the challenging consequences of low acids and colouring taking a really long time," remarks an exporter.

While the orange harvest in Citrusdal is running late, Eastern Cape Valencias' lower than usual acid levels could mean an earlier harvest.

Low acid levels are also affecting a significant amount of late mandarins from the north of the country. It compromises shelf life, results in blandness of taste and an exporter predicts that this fruit will flood the local market.

The orange crop load is down and citrus black spot takes its toll, especially when complying to the EU's zero tolerance of the external blemish, therefore further reductions to the orange export estimate are inevitable.

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