

Freeze kills entire orchards in lowlying and exposed parts of southern Limpopo

Very expensive couple of weeks ahead for citrus



The consequences of last week's freezing temperatures will be profound, says Gert Upton, senior manager: marketing and sales at Groblersdal-based Schoonbee Landgoed. While citrus farmers are still out in the orchards cutting fruit to determine the extent of the damage, the emotional impact of entire blocks of lemons and oranges frozen to death is taking its toll on them.

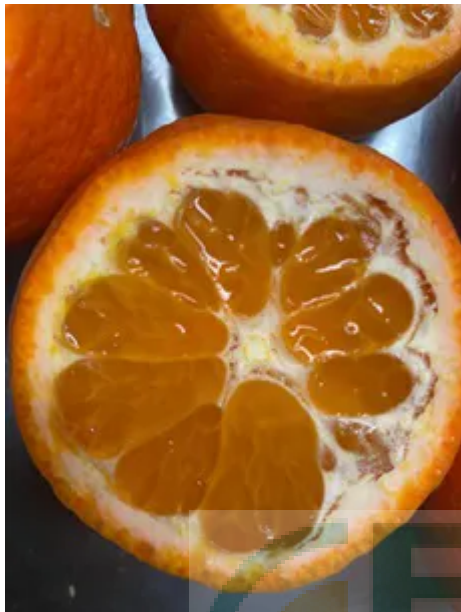
"In places it was -8°C for almost five hours, killing those trees. There are farmers whose entire crop is gone. And those trees might be only six, seven years old. Now they're ready to be dug up and you've lost the total investment, income or future potential on those orchards that you've spent on those hectares over the last five or six years," Upton says.

At Schoonbee, they've decided not to pack anything for the next two weeks, waiting for the oranges damaged by frost to drop off. It's more difficult to see the signs of cold damage on soft citrus, which dries out inside and pulls away from the skin, while the fruit still looks perfect from the outside.

He emphasizes that the extent of the damage in their region and in the wider Limpopo province is not yet clear. Everyone's in their orchards, seeing what they've lost and what they have left.

The Citrus Growers' Association today noted: The freezing weather in Senwes (Marble Hall and Groblersdal) has meant that the navel estimate in that region has been reduced by 600,000 cartons and the Valencia volumes by one million cartons."

Further export cuts inevitable



"There's finally smaller volumes of fruit available in the Northern Hemisphere from this point on. There is the supply from the Southern Hemisphere and South Africa has already cut its export estimate by 12 million cartons [15-kg] so far this year and after last week, it will definitely be cut again. There's a very expensive couple of weeks ahead for citrus as we evaluate the damages and lost income, also with regards to packaging, chemicals and labour that was planned."

Right: the effect of freezing temperatures on soft citrus.

All of their marketing plans are thrown into disarray and he expects a lot of problems with how the country will be able to service markets (or not) for the rest of the season.

The port of Durban has been running smoothly – unlike Gqeberha or Cape Town, he notes – as a result of the already lower citrus volumes as well as the edge taken off by exports through Maputo port.

The strong orange juice price is a saving grace, and Schoonbee Landgoed's own juice facility will be able to absorb much of their own damaged volume.

"Food is going to become a problem"

Cold damage depended on farms' topography and location, stretching right up north to major potato production areas like Dendron and Vivo, where whole fields of young potatoes are also irrevocably frozen and millions of kilograms lost.

Initially, as farmers salvage what they can from their decimated crop the price will drop, but thereafter it will reach levels unaffordable to many South Africans.

"A lot of product died, and food is going to become a problem. What happened will have an economic impact, it will have a social impact and a psychological impact on the farmers and the people who get sent home earlier, and get paid for a month less. All manner of socio-economic problems are going to come from this freeze."

More citrus farms will be possibly put up for sale, he says, steadily eroding South Africa's food security.



Schoonbee Landgoed's juice range.



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