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More fruit exports to India viable but also challenging

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South Africa's capacity to produce quality fresh produce could meet India's growing demand for more perishables, but the freight sector will have to tick a few cold chain boxes to secure shipments.

Currently providing up to 15% of India's annual imports of citrus, pears and apples, this figure could be increased, provided the necessary phytosanitary protocols are met, trade executive Shuba Rawal told the recent Southern African conference of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA).

Rawal, who heads up sales at Mumbai-based wholesale imports and distributor, IG International Private, stressed that India's 1.46 billion population – the largest in the world since surpassing China – is pushing the country's demand for more fresh produce.

She told delegates attending the IFPA conference in Pretoria that India was already importing about 750 000 tonnes of perishables every year, and that expanding demand had been at least 7.5% year-on-year since the coronavirus pandemic.

Rawal said India's predominantly young population – at least 50% are under the age of 35 – coupled with a fast-growing interest in general wellness across the nation, had been identified as the primary reason for the country's expanding consumption of perishables.

And yet challenges for more fruit exports from South Africa remain, primarily import tax on citrus (33%) and apples (50%).

These tariffs, along with strict cold-chain regulations in a vast country with temperatures soaring towards 40 degrees and beyond, posed serious hurdles for an increase in fruit shipments from South Africa to India, Rawal said.

Because of its terrain, size – about 3.29 million square kilometres – and density dynamics, it's a well-known fact that logistics in India is a different ballgame altogether.

Add cold chain requirements into the mix and India, as a market for more shipments, posed significant challenges, Rawal said.

Highly populated states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Maharashtra, along with major metropolitan hubs like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad, are densely packed with residents, placing immense pressure on urban supply networks.

Meanwhile, large swathes of the country – including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and parts of north-east and central India – remain rural, sparsely populated, and underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure.

Currently, around 63% of the Indian population reside in rural areas, where access to reliable roads, electricity and modern storage facilities is limited. This urban-rural divide further complicates efforts to maintain an effective cold chain network, essential for preserving temperature-sensitive products such as fruits, vegetables, dairy and pharmaceuticals.

India's geographical diversity adds another layer of complexity. From mountainous regions to deserts, coastal zones to agricultural plains, deploying a uniform cold chain infrastructure is challenging. The country also faces the logistical issue of long transport routes between rural production centres and urban consumption hubs, demanding consistent and efficient temperature-controlled distribution.

Urban areas bring their own problems – traffic congestion and delays, which increase the risk of spoilage if goods are not maintained at required temperatures throughout the journey.

In response to these challenges, experts stress the urgent need for investment in extensive cold storage facilities, particularly in both production and consumption zones. Reliable last-mile connectivity is

critical, requiring specialised vehicles capable of maintaining cold conditions and access to stable energy sources in remote areas.

Technological integration is also key. Advanced monitoring systems must be employed to track temperatures and ensure integrity across the supply chain. Additionally, seamless coordination between farmers, transporters, warehouse operators, and retailers is vital for ensuring timely delivery and reducing waste.

As India's population continues to grow and urbanise, the efficiency of its cold chain logistics will play a crucial role in supporting food security, public health and economic sustainability.

