

South African citrus industry is on the path to true sustainability

By [Fred Meintjes](#) | 15 December 2025

Albert Coetzee explores how the sector is navigating the transition from compliance-focused audits to meaningful sustainability partnerships



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Albert Coetzee, industry affairs manager at the Citrus Growers' Association in South Africa, has attempted to unpack the latest developments in sustainability advancements.

Speaking in an article called 'Beyond compliance' in Hortgro's *Fresh Quarterly* magazine, Coetzee questioned whether regulators and retailers are moving past box-ticking to true sustainability.

"Markets have begun to recognise that the grower's risk is also the retailer's risk," he said. "So, instead of arriving on site with a clipboard and a checklist, buyers are sitting down with growers to discuss the grower's sustainability plan. Ticking a box is no longer good enough."

"It doesn't help to have all these sustainability requirements in place, but they don't make a difference," he said. "Creating more paperwork isn't the point of the exercise."

With approximately 100,000 hectares under cultivation and more than R25bn in annual exports, citrus is the largest South African fruit sector.

Almost half of the industry's exports go to the UK and Europe, so Coetzee said he has to keep a close watch on the evolving demands of these markets.

In 2020, the European Union introduced their Green Deal, with the Farm to Fork strategy for agriculture.

"Farm to Fork included ambitious targets such as slashing pesticide and fertiliser use and converting 25 per cent of European Union agriculture to organic production," he continued.

However, Coetzee pointed out, the strategy proved massively unpopular with farmers and the food industry, sparking protests and pressure that eventually led regulators to retreat.

Following a strategic dialogue, the European Commission pivoted to a new strategy in 2025, called the Vision for Food and Agriculture.

"Among other goals, the new strategy aims to enhance trade resilience and promote fair competition," he noted.

"Imported and European agricultural products will have to meet the same standards, including adherence to the same environmental requirements."

"It's a simpler policy, and it exempts most businesses in Europe from reporting," Coetzee explained.

"It is environmental, social, and governance-based (ESG) with companies identifying and eliminating the risks in their value chains."

According to Coetzee, growers see ESG as a commitment to farming more sustainably in terms of their environmental, social, and legal context.

“When you talk with retailers, you realise that they are starting to do their own sustainability assessments,” he commented. “They want to know what the issues are on your farm or in your environment, and what you are doing to improve those.”

This is not to suggest that compliance will ever go away. Retailers must demonstrate that their suppliers operate within the law, so something like Siza certification, which mainly covers South African social and environmental legislation, is essential.

Export-focused South African fruit industries, such as citrus and deciduous fruit, are accustomed to audits for compliance.

Still, many feel that ESG overlaps with existing requirements and imposes unnecessary additional audits.

“People have the impression that, yet again, someone is sitting in front of them, putting another demand on the table,” said Coetzee. “But that’s because they don’t entirely understand the core of the demand.”

He argued that ESG has the potential to affect real sustainability.

“It’s about identifying your risks and committing to addressing them,” Coetzee added. “So, it’s relevant to all growers.”

