South Africa expands rail use for citrus exports

The 2025 citrus export peak season in South Africa projects shipping an anticipated 171.1 million 15kg cartons of citrus. Recognized as the country's largest agricultural export, the sector underscores the importance of efficient logistics, particularly through port and rail enhancements. Despite recent focus on port logistics, there's a growing recognition of rail transport's role.

The first refrigerated citrus train departed from City Deep, Johannesburg, to Durban recently, part of a push for enhanced rail logistics spearheaded by CTI Logistics. Approximately 40% of export citrus originates from Limpopo, traveling 850 km under strict cold chain protocols to Durban for shipping. The dominance of truck transport, approximately 90%, highlights the uniqueness of CTI's rail initiative.

From CTI's cold storage, Limpopo citrus is transported to the City Deep terminal. Each week, a minimum of 48 refrigerated containers, or "reefers," depart the terminal. Claudia Cuturi of CTI Logistics highlighted the facility's expansion potential, which currently hosts 48 plug-points for electricity supply, crucial for temperature management. She noted, "Transnet sometimes gets bad press, but really, these containers in Johannesburg are treated like their own children. Temperatures are checked through the night and day. Along the route, where necessary, a safety car follows the train to provide additional security."

There's a strong economic rationale for rail: It offers lower transportation costs and is more fuel-efficient, greatly reducing the carbon footprint. Additionally, shipping by rail circumvents some of the road issues like accidents and congestion on the route to Durban. Projected citrus industry growth is noteworthy. The Citrus Growers' Association anticipates truck trips to escalate from 2,200 to over 3,800 weekly within three years, necessitating viable rail alternatives.

Cuturi acknowledges the scalability, saying, "The more containers we move, the cheaper the rates can be. And the structure is there to grow the project," with current shipments heading to Europe. Other successful rail initiatives include Kholwa Logistics, which collaborates with Transnet, transporting citrus from Bela-Bela. Despite infrastructure challenges, initiatives like these signal possible growth areas.

Minister Barbara Creecy's recent call for private sector involvement in rail infrastructure aligns with these efforts, indicating a push toward enhanced logistics.

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