Rail boosts 2025 South African citrus exports

The South African citrus export season of 2025 has hit its stride, with projections estimating the shipment of 171.1 million 15kg cartons of citrus by the season's conclusion. As the top agricultural export sector in South Africa, efficient logistics are key, and while port logistics often dominate discussions, the potential of rail transport deserves attention.

Recently, the first train carrying refrigerated citrus containers left City Deep in Johannesburg for the Port of Durban. 2025 promises a growth year for this route, facilitated by CTI Logistics. Rail transport from Johannesburg, currently an exception, represents 40% of South Africa's citrus exports originating in Limpopo. After cooling in CTI's facilities, the citrus embarks on an 850 km journey to Durban. Rail currently covers just 10% of this route, with most relying on trucks, spotlighting CTI's efforts.

A weekly train, equipped with 48 refrigerated containers and powered by plug-points for precise temperature control, rolls out during peak season. Claudia Cuturi of CTI Logistics emphasizes the role of Transnet's facilities in ensuring optimal container conditions. "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," stated Cuturi.

Addressing citrus demand through rail is imperative for several reasons. Rail offers lower transport costs per ton than trucking, is four times more fuel-efficient, and produces 75% less greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, trucking route issues, like accidents and road wear, often cause delays. The Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) notes a projected increase in truck trips from 2,200 to over 3,800 in upcoming seasons, necessitating viable rail alternatives for infrastructure strain.

Cuturi mentions potential scaling, "The more containers we move, the cheaper the rates can be. And the structure is there to grow the project. Currently, the citrus on the trains is all destined for Europe." Ventures like Kholwa Logistics, with operations from Bela-Bela, illustrate rail's potential.

Despite rail's infrastructural challenges, initiatives like CTI and Kholwa's demonstrate rail's feasibility. A recent Request for Information by Minister Barbara Creecy, which received 162 responses, indicates burgeoning private sector interest.

The CGA suggests utilizing the Loskop Valley region for rail transport, aligning with their aim of 100,000 new jobs by 2032. Successful rail projects prove strategic rail partnerships can achieve this ambition, reinforcing South Africa's global citrus presence.

Source: IOL (https://iol.co.za/business-report/opinion/2025-07-02-glimmers-of-hope-for-increased-use-of-rail-for-citrus/)

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