

E. coli in Lowveld rivers threatens produce exports

South Africa's Lowveld region is encountering an agricultural challenge tied to escalating E. coli levels in local river waters, a development affecting food safety and export prospects. The issue stems from inadequately maintained sewage infrastructure and the spread of informal settlements near these waterways, leading to contamination.

The Crocodile and Elands rivers have showcased contamination levels with tests revealing counts up to 100 CFU per 100ml, exceeding safety thresholds. Farmers, dependent on these rivers for irrigation, face increased water purification costs and reputational risks impacting global trade.

Sources of pollution include defective municipal sewage treatments and informal settlements lacking sanitation. These areas contribute untreated waste to rivers, particularly during heavy rainfall. Local monitoring bodies have flagged these issues, opened criminal cases against municipalities, but enforcement is weak, and remediation is hindered by funding and administrative challenges.

Especially vulnerable are export-oriented farmers cultivating blueberries, vegetables, and citrus. E. coli presence in produce risks triggering bans in premium international markets. While macadamias face a lesser risk due to their shells, contamination impacts processing safety and market perceptions.

Despite calls for action, river water quality improvements remain elusive. Growers continue investing in filtration and testing to meet export standards. They stress that without upgraded sewage plants and waste infrastructure in settlements, South Africa's fresh produce standing could face long-term setbacks.

The Lowveld's agriculture, vital for local employment and export revenue, confronts an urgent need for improved sanitation infrastructure and pollution control to protect food safety and international market trust. Farmers express urgency in addressing these challenges before they lead to severe economic impacts.

Source: Urban Acres (<https://urbanacres.in/toxic-river-water-puts-south-africas-fruit-export-industry-at-risk/>)

Frontpage photo: © Marinv | Dreamstime

Publication date: Mon 30 Jun 2025

-
-

