South African citrus still well-positioned for growth

By Fred Meintjes | 14 March 2025

Country's Citrus Summit highlights market access and logistical challenges as priorities

South Africa's citrus industry is facing uncertain times, but its growth trajectory is assured if market access opportunities are seized, and logistics challenges are addressed with urgency.

The industry emerged from its annual grower and stakeholder meeting in the Eastern Cape with a statement outlining what is waiting in 2025 and beyond.

Speaking to growers at the fifth Citrus Summit in Gqeberha, South Africa's minister of agriculture John Steenhuisen said the citrus industry was one of the success stories of in the country.

"It is creating countless jobs in our rural communities – where we need them most," he noted.

The minister also referred to South Africa's citrus industry's participation in the US market under the American Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

Steenhuisen warned that South Africa's potential elimination put thousands of jobs at risk, and could have a domino effect throughout the value chain.

"I urge all stakeholders to prioritise the renewal of AGOA, or at least trade tariffs and agreements that will allow us to keep our excellent citrus products flowing to the markets that love them so much," he said.

The country's citrus exports to the US normally start at the end of April and gain momentum from June onwards. South Africa traditionally markets around 100,000 tonnes of citrus annually in the US.

While AGOA has been extended for this year, no major decisions about the future have been taken yet.

Steenhuisen also highlighted the urgent need to explore and develop new markets, particularly in Asia, the Middle East and India.

New South African Citrus Growers' Association (CGA) chief executive, Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, said increased market access was crucial for the future of the industry.

"Projections show the industry can create 100,000 additional jobs by 2032," he explained. "It can do this through increasing exports by roughly 95mn 15kg cartons to total annual exports of 260mn cartons."

Port logistics have been a major problem for the South African citrus industry in recent times.

Transnet's Group chief executive officer Michelle Phillips told the conference that the rail network was now open for private train operators.

She also referred to increased public sector participation in the wider logistics landscape.

"We will see the system become more competitive," she said. "This season has to work better than last year."

Quantifying the progress at the ports, Phillips reported equipment acquisitions in the 2024/2025 year of R3.4bn across eight terminals, and a planned R4bn across five terminals in 2025/2026.

Logistics expert Thomas Eskesen reminded delegates that port inefficiency came at a real cost.

In his opinion, the recent study by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy that found the total cost of inefficient logistics to the citrus industry amounted to R5.27bn per year was “highly underestimated”.

Eric Imbert, a lead researcher from the French agricultural research centre Cirad, pointed out that South Africa’s citrus industry had the potential to rise to the current challenging trading environment.

“South Africa has a relatively diversified market, innovative research capability, a large and fast evolving variety range, and a strong industry organisation with significant capacity,” he said.

Technological change was also a theme at the Summit.

Anya Jaworksi, business intelligence manager at fruit producer Safresco, showcased how artificial intelligence could be used to track citrus supply to Europe.

Through a detailed tracking model, seasonal predictions could help avoid imbalances in supply and demand.

“When times are in flux, a comprehensive summit that brings together all stakeholders, is not just beneficial, it’s essential,” said Justin Chadwick, outgoing CEO, who has led the CGA for 25 years. ”We navigate the hurdles together.”

Ntshabele reiterated the need for collaboration in times of change.

“Citrus is South Africa’s biggest agricultural export industry,” he said. ”It can be a driver of massive economic growth and rural development.

”But for this to happen, everybody along the supply chain – whether they are in the orchard, or at the port, or in the boardroom -–must be aligned. With this in mind, we look forward to starting the 2025 season.”