

Challenges stifle citrus industry optimism

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Source: Fresh Fruit Portal

Ahead of the official start of the citrus export season, the industry is bullish about the outlook in terms of available volumes for global markets and fruit quality.

"All available data projects that exports are in line with the five-year average, which means there will be sufficient fruit for our global markets. The outlook suggests no oversupply or undersupply," said Gerrit van der Merwe, chairman of the Citrus Growers Association of SA.

The current prediction is that 32.9 million 15kg cartons of lemons will be exported to key markets, which represents a 5% decrease from last year.

Early lemons are already on their way to overseas markets, especially to the Middle East, Russia and Canada.

Figures for navel and Valencia oranges are expected to be up this year. Predictions show a 5% increase in export volume for navels, with 26.1 million 15kg cartons available for packing.

Last year, unusual weather events such as floods in the Western Cape and frost in Limpopo affected navel exports, but weather permitting, volumes are expected to improve this year.

After four years of slight declines in Valencia orange figures, exports are likely to improve this year. An increase over 2024 figures of 6% to 52m 15kg cartons is projected.

However, despite the positivity, the industry continues to face two major challenges - deficient rail and port logistics and the European Union's unnecessary phytosanitary (plant health) measures regarding Citrus Black Spot (CBS) and False Codling Moth (FCM).

"The CGA is grateful for progress made by Transnet in terms of equipment acquisitions at ports, but the only long-term way to achieve the needed efficiency is through structural change," said Mitchell Brooke, the CGA's logistics development manager. A recent study by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy found that the total cost of inefficient logistics to the citrus industry amounted to R5.27 billion per year.

The EU's trade restrictive and unscientific measures on CBS and FCM are the focus of two historic cases at the World Trade Organization's trade dispute body. "We hope for swift progress on the cases, but disputes like these take time. We remain optimistic that the issue will be finalised before the 2026 season. Every season, the measures cost SA growers no less than R3.7bn, keeping especially emerging growers out of the EU market," said Justin Chadwick, outgoing CEO of the CGA.

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