

OPINION

MITCHELL BROOKE: Logistics partnerships in 2025 are hugely helping citrus growers

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Mitchell Brooke



Picture: GALLO IMAGES/DARREN STEWART

At the start of the 2025 citrus export season, the outlook for logistics was a concern for the citrus industry. For many in the sector, logistics remained one of the most significant constraints on our ability to compete globally.

But now, as we reach the end of our citrus export season, we can report improved efficiency. Citrus exports were processed at ports without much delay, especially at the Port of Durban. The season was also unique in its

collaborative nature. There was a singular focus among all role-players in the logistics value chain — including the private sector — to make sure our growers got their fruit to market.

This year has been a great example of how the collective actions of many stakeholders contribute to industry's ambitious growth strategy. Thanks to new orchards coming into production, the citrus industry can create 100,000 new jobs over the next seven years, but only if we can move our perishable produce in a timely way to the over 100 foreign markets that enjoy SA's high-quality citrus

This year Transnet Port Terminals managed to increase throughput at ports through investment in new equipment and improvements in its operational model. The initiation of incentives that were aligned to productivity had a marked effect on efficiency. Some 115,000 40-foot-equivalent containers were moved, up from 94,000 containers last year. Also, the specialised reefer vessels (SRVs) shipped 220,000 pallets, up from 200,000.

Not only did most of our fruit leave for overseas markets on time, but the Port of Cape Town was even able to support the slightly truncated US shipping season, as growers increased their shipments in advance of the imposition of a 30% tariff by the US in August.

Moving in the right direction

Apart from Transnet's actions, the actions of shipping lines also assisted in a smooth season. Due to a higher demand for refrigerated containers, a shortage was experienced for four weeks. Shipping lines responded to industry demand and supplied containers to ensure shipments.

In fact, 2025 stands out as a season in which collaboration contributed hugely to overcoming many foreseeable constraints. An informed and concerted value chain was seen in action — from trucking to cold storage, from orchards to ports, even including the rail network.

Overall, Transnet was able to increase freight moved by rail compared to the previous season, with the long-haul railing of 1,254 containers, up from 1,064 last year. The movement of goods via rail was still affected by some technical and security issues, but the fact that things are moving in the right direction cannot be ignored.

An adaptive logistics sector is essential when viewed in the context of global trade uncertainty. The disruptions caused by US tariffs and the broader trend

towards trade restrictions have pushed countries like ours to be as responsive as possible.

The commitment to improved efficiency shown by Transnet is commendable, especially when the increase in export citrus production during the 2025 season is considered. In terms of volume moved, it was a record export year for our industry.

To transport minister Barbara Creecy's credit, she and her team have repeatedly committed to private participation. Crucially, her recent announcement of 11 private sector operators being awarded 41 rail routes across six corridors for up to 10 years marks a tangible step forward. Forty percent of SA's citrus originates in Limpopo and must travel nearly 850km to Durban, so improved rail access is essential.

The Citrus Growers Association (CGA) also welcomes the recent court judgment which, after two years of waiting, provides much-needed legal clarity regarding the International Container Terminal Services (ICTSI) concession at the Port of Durban's Pier 2 Container Terminal.

The outcome is a significant advancement of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in SA. The citrus industry hopes implementation of the ICTSI-Transnet partnership now moves swiftly and that our growers will be able to reap the benefits of it as soon as possible.

Private sector participation is required across both rail and ports, not only to ensure efficiency but also to enable the investment and growth needed as citrus production continues to increase at pace. Significantly more volumes will need to be handled over the next few years.

Transnet's improved efficiency marks a critical milestone in its broader turnaround strategy. It has gone a long way towards improving international confidence in SA's logistics system. After years of underperformance and logistical bottlenecks, the company has made notable strides in stabilising its core operations.

It seems internal reforms and leadership changes are beginning to yield results. However, they represent only one pillar of the transformation required to reposition SA as a globally competitive logistics provider. The second pillar of Transnet's turnaround lies in the implementation of large-scale PPPs.

We look towards the next season and those after it. Creating 100,000 new jobs within the citrus industry over the next seven years is possible, and this year's logistics have started moving us closer toward that goal.

• *Brooke is logistics development manager at CGA.*

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