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RESILIENCE vs weakness



We need to ensure that our resilience is not seen as a sign of weakness, taking whatever is thrown at us without expecting accountability.

Some define resilience as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and adapting to challenging experiences – being tough. But can resilience be a bad thing? Can it also be seen as the ability to accept the unacceptable, to become complacent about others' shortcomings?

The period 2020 to 2022 has certainly tested the South African fruit industry's resilience – the hits just kept coming. After the shock of a global pandemic in 2020, growers were faced with an insurrection and riots in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng in July 2021. This hampered access to Durban port at the height of the citrus season. Subsequently, there was a cyber attack on the monopoly port operator, and congestion at major ports around the world, which ignited a dramatic increase in freight rates.

Most people were happy to see the back of 2021, not knowing that 2022 would test their resilience even further.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in significant price hikes across a range of farming inputs, while access to the Eastern European markets was uncertain. Locally, the Durban floods in April and May hindered access to the country's busiest port, once again. In rural Eastern Cape, criminals brought fruit packing to a halt, as they fuelled tension between workers and farmers in that region. For citrus growers the unjustified and unprocedural imposition of new regulations in the European Union (EU) disrupted exports and added considerable logistics costs, while freight rates were elevated for the entire season. To top it all, the monopoly port operator then faced a

strike that brought shipping to a halt.

For many industries, just one of these shocks could have been the end. Yet, most South African fruit growers continued to operate and meet their orders, maintained the highest employment numbers in the agricultural sector, and continued to earn foreign exchange to support rural development. And, “'n boer maak 'n plan”. Therefore, with little or no return from the market, growers are now having to set the 2023 crop by eating into reserves (those who have reserves), or by approaching lending institutions in order to stay in business. Unfortunately, many growers were unable to survive the severe economic setbacks and have placed their farms on the market.

But, outside of weather events and geopolitical conflict, some things are simply unacceptable – like scoring an “own goal”. It is unacceptable that law and order broke down to such an extent that KwaZulu-Natal was left to criminal elements to do what they wanted, that residents had to guard their suburbs throughout the night, that infrastructure was razed to the ground and looters helped themselves with impunity, and that the majority of perpetrators have not been criminally prosecuted while those protecting their family and homes have been arrested.

It is unacceptable that the EU defies all international trade best practices and implements new regulations mid-season, without proving any level of imminent threat. The communication from the EU was confusing to the South African government and their own member states, and the cost to industry was enormous.

The different fruit sectors have faced different challenges over the past three years. We need to ensure that our resilience is not seen as a sign of weakness, taking whatever is thrown at us without expecting accountability. ▮

