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The weight of off-farm demands



Justin Chadwick,
CGA CEO

Gone are the days when fruit growers could focus solely on producing a good quantity of excellent quality fruit.

There's a myriad of focus areas significant to the fruit business, and they just keep multiplying. Ignoring these would be perilous for the grower who now also needs to grasp what happens off-farm.

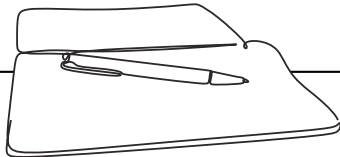
Currently, logistics consumes much more of growers' time. The availability and efficiency of transport from the farm to the port is no longer a given, as rail has deteriorated, and road transport costs have increased dramatically. Added to this are poor road conditions and criminality on the roads. Congestion in the port precinct often means fruit is "stored on rubber", pending access to cold stores or the stack, which racks up additional costs. For citrus growers from the north, the final 100 km to the port on the N3 is impacted by road works with frequent delays and accidents.

The myriad of focus areas significant to the fruit business just keep multiplying.

After a relatively trouble-free citrus season in 2023, the ports really battled as the stone-fruit and table-grape seasons came into full swing. For such perishable products the delays were unacceptable, and the losses incurred enormous. Fruit grower associations reached out to the minister to intervene and worked alongside Transnet to bring about improvements. Additional equipment was brought in, but the damage had been done. Port inefficiencies are not a new thing. Years of neglect in terms of infrastructure repair and upgrade, and maintenance and replacement of machinery mean that management and labour simply do not have the tools to do the job. The ports need a major investment to rectify the backlog. However, the South African fiscus is strained, with multiple demands for many worthy causes.

The only real solution is private sector investment. Fortunately, the ports offer quite an attractive investment opportunity. When the ports were well equipped and properly managed, they added substantial revenue to the government purse. Many port operators recognise this opportunity and there was serious interest in the joint venture proposal for Pier 2 in Durban. The announcement in 2023 of International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI) as the joint venture partner was welcomed and promises a new life for that terminal. The joint venture is scheduled to start at the beginning of April, and we should see incremental improvements, as much needed equipment is commissioned and systems improved.

Being concerned with challenges off-farm takes up so much of the average grower's time and energy. It would be good to leave South African fruit growers to concentrate fully on what they are good at – producing excellent quality fruit. 🍌



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