

'New markets remain crucial to grow citrus industry'

With citrus production projected to grow 25% by 2024, finding new markets to support the growing industry remains one of the biggest challenges for the South African citrus industry. Jeandré van der Walt reports.

The Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) estimates that close to 500 000t of additional citrus would be available for exporting by 2024. Justin Chadwick, CEO of the CGA, said the industry was well on track to achieve this, which would result in an additional income of over R6 billion in foreign exchange earnings per annum, and the creation of 30 000 additional jobs.

"However, it will be important to ensure that there is enough demand and enough markets to supply without negatively impacting returns. If we just take all of the fruit to the same markets that we have been utilising in the past, there will be a huge risk that we could oversupply and as a result the market could crash."

Currently, there was a concerted effort to improve market access. "Unfortunately, securing new markets takes time."

A lot of work needed to be done by authorities and researchers to ensure that the fruit exported did not contain pests and diseases, he said.

After 11 years of negotiations, a new market had finally been secured in the Philippines for South African citrus. Chadwick said the industry anticipated exporting about 10 000t of citrus to that country in 2021.

In addition, the industry was also pushing for exports to Japan, India, China and the US.

He said securing markets in the US and China would make a significant difference to South Africa's ability to export the volumes that was being anticipated. He explained that

currently only citrus from the Western and Northern Cape had access to the US, and further growth in this market would only be possible if growers in other provinces were given access to this market as well.

"The final ruling for the rest of South Africa has been in the mix for a number of years, and has been on the [Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development's] desk for many years for a final signature."

'AREAS SUFFERING FROM DROUGHT CAN QUICKLY RECOVER WITH GOOD RAIN'

China also held great opportunity for South African citrus, especially lemons, due to the improvement in entry conditions for lemons to China. He explained that lemons did not do well under cold shipping conditions.

"However, we do have a lemon protocol that has been agreed on by China and South Africa. All that is needed is for the relevant ministers to sign it off."

PRODUCTION OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, the CGA anticipated good citrus volumes in 2021, due to good fruit set in October 2020. However, Chadwick stressed that a lot could still happen between now and April when harvesting started.

He added that some citrus-growing regions still had very low water supplies, such as

the Letsitele area in Limpopo, and Patensie in the Eastern Cape. "There are definitely some water concerns, but if we do receive good summer rain, as predicted, the situation could turn around quickly."

Chadwick pointed out that one of the main obstacles to increased market access was the stringent phytosanitary requirements in some export destinations.

PEST AND DISEASE MANAGEMENT

He stressed that it was important for producers to ensure that their pest and disease management programmes were implemented correctly.

"In 2020, we had a good season in terms of interception of diseased fruit in the EU. It is important that we keep our interceptions low. Compliance will reduce the risk of any adverse measures in those markets."

Wayne Mansfield, a citrus farmer near Paarl, said he believed that the biggest challenge for producers in 2021 would be to ensure that the size and quality of their fruit were to standard, especially due to large global volumes expected.

He added that the CGA's funding for emerging farmers would present a significant opportunity for farmers who wanted to expand their operations in 2021. However, he stressed that although the funding was a boon for producers, it was of little use if farmers did not have access to land and water. "[Access to land remains a challenge for emerging farmers," he said.