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Dr Hennie Ehlers - Sundays River Valley Citrus Producers Forum

Violence and destruction of property harms economic development and opportunities for all

Following the outbreak of violent protests on citrus producing farms in the Sundays River Valley region last week, which saw growers suffering over R70 million in damages to their property, infrastructure and packhouses, and losing R100 million worth of fruit due to be exported, the Sundays River Valley Citrus Producer Forum (SRVCPF) has responded to the demands and grievances made by SANCO in their petition handed over last week.

Statement by Dr Hennie Ehlers, Chairman of the Sundays River Valley Citrus Producers Forum

It is important to note that service delivery did not form part of these demands and grievances. The Growers Forum, through levies paid per export carton by producers, have used these funds to maintain and upgrade these services in the communities of the Sundays River Valley since 2018.

Members of the forum have been meeting with various stakeholders throughout the course of last week in order to try to resolve the current situation in the area, which remains tense with many workers continuing to stay away from work.

It is unfortunate, that many employees wishing to return to work remain intimidated by factions of protestors, which is placing the entire local citrus sector at risk and the thousands of livelihoods it supports.

The damages incurred last week alone has been particularly devastating, given that over the past number of years, relationships between community, employers and employees in the valley have been harmonious. This follows the establishment of a collaborative in 2018, which created a safe space through which social issues could be addressed in a lawful and procedural manner. It was agreed that any disputes would follow the recognized labour dispute resolution structures created for such scenarios. All citrus industry employers are bound to pay minimum wage. Despite the gazette minimum, employers, independently and separately, and their employees, agree on wages in the workplace and any disputes are referred to the CCMA.

The current wave of violent and destructive protest action will have a compounding effect on the sustainability of citrus farms in the region, which are already under immense financial pressure due to rising inputs costs (including electricity, fertilizer and soaring freight rates) which are aggravated further by the inefficiency of our ports, global supply chain crises and the war in the Ukraine. It is possible that a high percentage of growers may not survive in the future and will certainly not be profitable in 2022. This bears a significant impact on local communities, given that our citrus growers are the largest employers in the region.

Given the above and the continued financial pressure on the citrus industry nationally, especially in the Sundays River valley, members of the Growers Forum are simply not able to increase minimum wages but remain committed to pay the legislated minimum wage of R23.19. It is also worth noting that a vast majority of employees earn in excess of the minimum wage, due to a range of other incentives that have been introduced by farmers in the area.

Commitment to Increasing Economic Opportunities and Development

Despite the threat to their financial sustainability due to rising input costs, every effort has been made by citrus growers to retain and increase employment opportunities, while ensuring the continued economic development and upliftment of the communities they operate in.

In relation to the collaborative, employers, who are members of the grower's forum in the valley, continue to make funds available, to sustain projects as well as maintenance of infrastructure in the valley, to the benefit of the community and municipality. Since 2018, over R22 million has been contributed by growers to these various projects.

Growers' efforts towards community upliftment initiatives have been complemented by an additional R50 million that was sourced from Government to upgrade water and sanitation facilities, by the Growers Forum. Through levies paid by citrus producers, the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa's (CGA) Citrus Academy has provided various programs in the valley to provide members of the local community with the training and qualifications required to become independent service providers for picking, pruning, and planting teams. Access to such opportunities has been made available on an ongoing basis.

Way Forward

The SRVCPF, despite respectfully, declining the demand for an increased minimum wage and committing to pay the gazetted minimum, remains available to meet to discuss any realistic requests regarding the upliftment and improvement of conditions of community members of the Sundays River Valley.

Regarding the allegations of unlawful or unfair conduct being committed by growers against their employees, the SRVCPF will appoint an independent specialist in the field of labour law, or other recognized independent forum to investigate the allegations and provide a report on its findings. Both the employee's and community representatives and the forum members will be afforded an opportunity to make representations to the specialist. The SRVCPF will involve the Department of Employment and labour to intervene should there be any employment acts in contravention of the minimum wage or any other transgressions of labour laws or human rights.

The SRVCPF remains committed to continuing to operate in an inclusive, objective and fair manner as these issues are addressed. We call on all members of the community, supply and value chain to work together towards normalising the current situation, so that an effective solution is found without any further violence or destruction.

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