

Fruit exporter: "We've come to expect delays of 7 to 21 days"

South African fruit, rotting in Cape Town Port, makes headlines

The South African fruit industry's shipping dilemma and the role played by delays at the port of Cape Town made [headline news](#) in a Sunday newspaper this weekend, with an article that claims that "tonnes of export fruit are rotting due to port chaos". It quotes industry leaders that the fruit sector has sustained losses estimated at R1 billion (62.26 million euros) so far this season.

The industry is in ongoing talks with Transnet, the state-owned ports authority, and there had been hopes of an improvement at the port as operations returned to normality after the Covid lockdowns.



A long line of trucks in Salt River taking fruit to Cape Town's container terminal where it will probably wait days before being loaded

"In short it boils down to ageing equipment and infrastructure, with lack of ongoing maintenance at Cape Town harbour," says an exporter, compounded by very limited opportunities on reefer lines and low stock levels of empty equipment (containers).

He adds: "We've now come to expect that every single consignment will be delayed at the port before loading. The norm is that when a vessel docks, it ought to be offloaded within one day. The following day the stacks open and then the vessel is loaded in four days before sailing off to the next port of call, in all taking a maximum seven days. Currently, though, it takes an average of seven days to offload vessels and another seven days to load it."

"Meanwhile," he continues, "trucks with the next vessel's containers keep arriving and offloading. Fruit therefore stand waiting for anything between 7 and 21 days before being loaded onto a vessel."

No fruit can currently leave for the East from Cape Town

Last year exporters started trucking Cape stonefruit and table grapes for the Middle and Far East from Durban to get a geographical advantage from the Indian Ocean port. This year, an exporter says, they're doing it again, but this time because they have no choice.

At the moment, for the moment, there are no shipping lines loading for the Middle and the Far East from Cape Town, as lines bypass Cape Town and "its Transnet affliction", as a source in the shipping industry calls it.

Exporters are having to dig deep financially to send fruit by road to Port Elizabeth and Durban. On the Cape Town-Durban route there's a shortage of return freight and a consequent limited number of reefer trucks plying that route. Freight costs to truck fruit to other ports are extremely high, pushed up further by the increasing diesel price.

In Durban, a cold room manager tells FreshPlaza they hosted table grapes for the first time ever this year.

Simultaneous arrivals put pressure on Europe

As a result of the delays, there has been a bunch-up of vessels arriving simultaneously in Europe.

"And apart from the bunch-up, there are the containers that can't go to Russia, which now also end up in Europe putting more pressure on the system, wrong packaging, quality problems, it's having a big effect."

A grape exporter tells FreshPlaza that things started going badly with the power outage in December, during which period it transpired that Transnet didn't have the necessary alternative power capacity during times of power outages (a common enough occurrence in South Africa).

The temperature of grapes that stood for 36 hours without cooling were brought back down, but the damage was done, and exporters and growers grimly expected quality claims. Transnet had declared force majeure during that event, which makes insurance payments unlikely.

He adds that it's a catastrophe for the fruit industry.

Some exporters also blame a new truck booking system for causing further delays of fruit standing for days before being loaded.

"The future doesn't look much better. Citrus farmers are expecting record crops and if it continues in this vein, it spells nothing good," remarks an exporter.

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