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ECONOMY

War and floods cost SA citrus growers millions in exports

Growers cut export forecast as weather damage and shipping disruptions squeeze season prospects

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South Africa is the world's second-largest exporter of citrus after Spain. Picture: (John Wait)

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South Africa's citrus exports for 2026 are expected to be lower than initially forecast after floods in the Western and Eastern Cape damaged some crops, while the war between the US and Iran has made supplying the fruit to the Middle East difficult.

The Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA) has revised its total export estimate down to 205.3-million 15kg cartons from the 209.4-million cartons predicted before the season commenced, it said on Wednesday.

"It has been a very challenging season for our growers on a number of fronts. Floods in the Western and Eastern Cape have impacted the season," the CGA said.

"Factors beyond our borders have proved consequential. Supplying the Middle East has remained difficult as a result of the ongoing conflict in the region. The war has also placed considerable pressure on input and logistics costs, such as diesel and, most notably, shipping rates."

The Middle East traditionally receives about 20% of South Africa's citrus exports.

The industry, which employs 140,000 people at farm level and is South Africa's largest agricultural export industry, had in April anticipated growth of up to 5% in exports in 2026. It did, however, warn about uncertainties over how the Middle East conflict would affect demand as well as shipping and fuel availability.

In May the CGA said the severe flooding that affected citrus-producing areas in the Western Cape and parts of the Eastern Cape had dealt a blow to the sector's prospects after a strong 2025 season in which its exports surpassed those of global industry giant Spain.

"The conflict's effects extend well beyond the region, weighing on demand in other markets as well. The potential spread of the conflict to the Red Sea and any disruptions at the Port of Jeddah are a growing concern for shipping routes and for grower options going forward," the association said in its update on Wednesday.

The industry has now reached the peak of the export period, placing considerable pressure on port capacity, with delays at the Port of Durban.

Last month, the CGA said inefficient logistics continued to hurt the industry and made another plea for an overhaul of the rail system to improve the transportation of produce from northern regions to ports in the south of the country. About 95% of the national citrus crop moves by road to ports.

The association said the rail system is "crying out" for private sector participation, similar to International Container Terminal Services Inc's (ICTSI) takeover of responsibility for pier 2 at Durban Port.

A 2025 study by the Independent Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy found that the combined direct and indirect cost of inefficient logistics to the citrus industry reached R5.27bn in the 2024 season.

The industry generated about $2.47bn in export earnings in 2025, according to the South African Revenue Service.

During that record-breaking season, 203.4-million 15kg cartons were delivered to global markets, a 22% increase over the 2024 packed-for-export figures, the department of agriculture said. Two thirds of citrus production is exported as fresh fruit.

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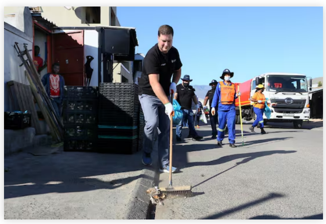

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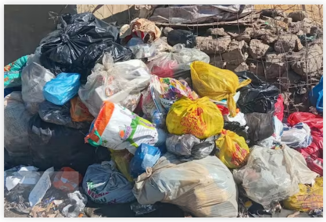

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