

Rohan Beukes, Leandra van der Merwe - ANB Group of Packhouses:

How easily can South African citrus packhouses conform to new EU packaging regulations?

"The company buys around 27 different types of cartons – eleven of those designed specifically for citrus – for the five packhouses within the ANB Group," says Rohan Beukes, packaging buyer at the ANB Group. Through centralised purchases for all of the packhouses in the group - Twypack (Mbombela), Naranja (Burgersfort), BBI Packers (Hoedspruit), Arisa (Swellendam) and Capac (Robertson) - they can guarantee reliable stock levels at competitive prices for their packing activity. Although citrus remains the main crop, these packhouses also pack mangoes, blueberries, tomatoes, butternuts, stone fruit and kiwis.

"We have had to switch to other packing programmes at the last minute due to global events and unforeseen circumstances. Having stock on hand, together with the strong relationships we maintain with our suppliers, has enabled us to do so successfully," Beukes remarks. "We also minimise risk by not relying on a single packaging supplier and instead maintain a diversified supplier base."



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The goal of using 70% recyclable material by the beginning of 2030 is "realistic and easily achievable"

"When discussing packaging," he notes, "quality is the single most important consideration. It needs to ensure that the product will arrive fresh and undamaged, despite the long transit time, the exposure to low temperatures, high humidity and the constant movement. Good packaging allows airflow throughout its interior to limit phytosanitary problems without sacrificing structural integrity, and at the same time, good packaging can be seamlessly integrated into automation systems within the packhouse."

Over the past decade, the cost of cardboard packaging increased between 4.5% and 6.2%, largely driven by rising costs of paper, electricity and transport.

"Cartons and packaging material make up roughly 70% of the costs associated with a citrus packhouse. That is why we place a huge emphasis on packaging innovation and reducing waste."

They are on the same page as the European Union: the bloc requires South African packhouses to conform to its Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, which the Citrus Growers' Association calls "a significant regulatory shift in its approach to packaging" from 12 August 2026.

Packhouses will be required to supply information on each component making up their packaging, substantiated by technical specifications from the manufacturer. "The ANB Group and allied packhouses already act proactively, where possible, by implementing sustainable products and materials," he says. Instead of waiting

for the EU regulations' deadline of February 2028 for industrially compostable fruit labels, they already made the switch to home compostable labels on their branded mandarins a while ago as part of a broader sustainability approach.

All packaging entering the EU must eventually be recyclable and reusable, with 1 January 2030 set as the date by which 70% of packaging must be recyclable. "We regard the goal of using 70% recyclable material by the beginning of 2030 as realistic and easily achievable, since the major part of our packaging already consists of recyclable carton."



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"Almost everything we use is manufactured in South Africa, with the exception of the home compostable paper of which our compostable PLU stickers are made."

Food safety standards a hurdle to 40% target for recycled materials

The requirement of 40% recycled material is, however, more challenging, Beukes observes. "In the fresh produce industry we are subject to strict food security requirements related to packaging material that comes in direct contact with the product. All of the liners in our cartons consist of 100% virgin paper, directly as a result of these food safety regulations. For this reason, there might need to be modifications to the relevant food safety standards and/or regulations or technological improvements in the field of food grade recycled materials."

The corrugated fluting between the liners that they use in their packhouses is currently made of a combination of 70% virgin paper and 30% recycled paper. "Our manufacturers use recycled material where it is practical and food safe, while simultaneously safeguarding the strength and elasticity of the packaging."

The EU packaging waste regulations also set maximum levels for the presence of heavy metals (lead, mercury, cadmium and hexavalent chromium) and per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS). In the citrus industry, almost 100% dependent on cardboard-based packaging, heavy metals and PFAS are fortunately not generally present in cardboard (except insofar as the timber grown for paper pulp had perhaps taken it up from the soil) nor in the inks used.

"Therefore, heavy metals are not a topic that frequently comes up in our sustainability audits in the packhouse. The new EU regulations place greater emphasis on the declaration and verification of the absence of heavy metals. We obtain the necessary documentation from our suppliers."



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Soft citrus is packed only in open-top cartons to prevent bruising and damage

He continues that per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS) are frequently employed where a degree of oil or water resistance needs to be imparted to packaging material, not characteristics required by citrus packaging.

Sustainability from start to finish

Part of sustainability is supporting the local economy. "Almost everything we use is manufactured in South Africa, with the exception of the home compostable paper of which our compostable PLU stickers are made," Beukes says. "We are proud to be able to support local manufacturers and the local economy. These close partnerships, often stretching over years, assist us in obtaining products of high quality."

All waste generated during packing processes is collected and sent for recycling, as part of the service delivery agreements they conclude with packaging suppliers and recyclers. "We limit the amount of waste that enters the conventional waste stream and ends up in landfills to an absolute minimum. We strongly believe that materials that can be recycled ought to go back into the value chain. Cardboard is a recyclable material par excellence, which is the reason it plays an important role in our sustainability initiatives."



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<https://www.anbinvestments.co.za/our-businesses/fruit-farming-packing-processing-technology/> (<https://www.anbinvestments.co.za/our-businesses/fruit-farming-packing-processing-technology/>)

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