

CITRUS

Eastern Cape navel orange fruit drop threatens exports

The unprecedented fruit drop of navel oranges, described as being the worst in living memory, was threatening the export of both grades one and two of the Eastern Cape harvest.

Both the main citrus producing areas in the Eastern Cape, namely the Sundays River Valley and Gamtoos Valley, had been the hardest hit by the fruit drop, the cause of which remained unknown.

"At first we thought the harvest might be 30% lower, but now we're thinking it might be down by 50% or more," said Hannes de Waal, managing director of the Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC).

"The impact could be even as much as between four or five million 15kg-cartons."

Initially, it was believed that the fruit drop was caused by a build-up of salinity due to

irrigation practices, but the phenomenon had also been encountered in areas under fresh water irrigation.

"This is the first time ever that something like this has hit fruit farmers in the Eastern Cape," said De Waal.

The skin of early and mid-season navel varieties split on the underside, with the fruit eventually falling from the trees.

"We expect researchers from Citrus Research International [to arrive] within days to [help] determine the cause of the [fruit drop]," said De Waal.

He added that while the region usually received rain during October, it had not received any rain in October 2016.

"For a while now, nature hasn't been playing along. Over the past 18 months, we've had exactly half of our usual rainfall."

According to De Waal, Valencia

orange varieties were also beginning to show signs of splitting. He said that the company had alerted its clients to this problem, and that it would focus on other markets, such as the Middle East, which had less stringent export criteria.

"The Middle East is very important to us," said De Waal.

Petrus du Preez, chairperson of the Gamtoos Agricultural Association, said he believed the unusual summer season with little rain and high temperatures could be the cause of the fruit drop. "I have been in the industry for many years and this is definitely the worst fruit drop I have ever experienced so far," said Du Preez.

Snyman Kritzinger of Grown4U in the Gamtoos Valley said he had also never seen anything like this in his 19 years in the industry.

– Lourens Schoeman

DROUGHT

Gamtoos Valley water shortages remain critical

The situation remained critical for irrigation farmers in the Eastern Cape's Gamtoos Valley, and continued to worsen, due to the prevailing drought.

In the week of 1 May, the level of the Kouga Dam, which supplies water to these farmers, was just above 24%.

Some farmers in the region had already exhausted their annual quotas for the current water year, which ends in June. The water quotas for the 2017/2018 water year would come into effect on 1 July.

The Gamtoos Valley was known as the 'pantry of the Eastern Cape' due to vegetables produced there.

"Our irrigation scheme has a unique system in that your water inlet is physically locked when you have used up your quota," said Petrus du Preez, chairperson of the Gamtoos Agricultural Association. Producers could, however, buy

water from other farmers who had excess water, but this was happening less frequently than in the past.

The state also did not recommend this practice.

"There are rumours that certain stakeholders are in favour of having this right cancelled," Du Preez added.

Farmers planned their planting for the season according to their annual quotas.

"If you run out of water, your planning was over-optimistic. But that is how we survive," said Du Preez.

The current abnormal heat was a large contributing factor to the water shortage. "Apart from this, our normal rain in November, December and March did not materialise this time around," said Du Preez.

According to Du Preez water allocations for the next season would reflect current dam levels. With the

dam at only about 20% of capacity, farmers would most likely have to make do with much smaller water allocations than in the past.

According to Pierre Joubert, CEO of the Gamtoos Irrigation Board, the situation was worsening on a daily basis. "Hard, penetrating rain is urgently required to increase the level of the dam considerably and to bring relief," he said.

"It rains less in winter, but luckily the demand for water is also less. The main reason for this is that the days are shorter. Farmers use less water than on longer, hot summer days," he said.

Unfortunately, weather forecasters predicted that the region was entering another dry season.

"In the meantime we will remain hopeful and positive," said Du Preez. – Lourens Schoeman