

Water worries for RSA citrus

As South African growers meet to formulate their crop forecast, heavy rain and drought is dominating the talk

The South African citrus industry is meeting this week to put the finishing touches to its 2017 crop estimate, in the knowledge that in the northern parts of the country good rains have vastly improved the situation, while in the Eastern and Western Cape the critical drought is cause for huge concern.

Recent tropical cyclone Dineo, which lashed Mozambique and caused widespread destruction, resulted in heavy rain across the north of South Africa where growers suffered substantial losses in their orchards last year. Dams that had been almost empty were replenished, and this will undoubtedly lead to more optimism about this year's crop.

However, the citrus regions in the Cape are in the midst of a devastating drought which is affecting fruit growers across the region. The heartland of citrus fruit growing in this region is the Olifants River Valley, where most of the exports to the US originate from, and there growers have had to contend with extremely high temperatures and water shortages.

Apple and pear growers in Ceres, where the drought had a significant impact last year, started off the season with more water resources. However, growers in the Vyeboom Region are affected by severe restrictions. The Theewaterskloofdam, the major sources of water for the region and for Cape Town's sprawling metropolitan areas, is less than 30 per cent full. Consumers are already contending with severe water restrictions and the authorities have warned that there is less than 120 days of water supplies left.

The problem is that the Western Cape is a winter rainfall region and cannot reasonably expect significant rain, which is urgently needed, before May. If the winter rains are late, the Western Cape will face huge problems, both for its cities and the agricultural sector.

In the Eastern Cape, citrus growers in the Patensie Valley also have to contend with low dam levels, and it has not rained for some time in the Sunday's River Valley, South Africa's biggest single citrus growing region.

For the citrus industry in the north, those watching the Tzaneen dam – which provides water to the Letsitele region – saw it rise to almost 52 per cent. This is much higher than the 31 per cent recorded this time last year.

The Blyderivierspoort dam supplying Hoedspruit has been overflowing for some time, as is the Witbank dam for Senwes, another major citrus region. Likewise the Loskop dam which also provides water for the Senwes region has risen from 63 per cent to 81 per cent in a week. Rainfall figures for last week (beginning 27 Feb) show Tzaneen received 133mm while Letsitele got 126mm.

The citrus industry will formulate its crop estimate this week and it is expected that the water situation will feature strongly in its deliberation.

Last year the total crop ended at 109m cartons compared to the previous year's 118.4m cartons. Against the background of the drought in the eastern and western regions of the country, coupled with the lingering after-effects of last year's drought in the north, one has a feeling that those tasked with predicting the crop will err on the cautious side.