United States backing for South African citrus exports

FRED MEINTJES

The United States is committed to a successful citrus export programme by South African citrus growers to the USA and has promised support to the local industry in order to remove any obstacles that may affect the programme.

This is the message from the US Consul General in Cape Town, Mr Moosa Valli, who visited the main production region for fruit being exported to the USA in Citrusdal in the Western Cape in order to strengthen relationships with South African growers.

Mr Valli's visit took place following a recent incident in the United States when false codling moth (FMC) larvae were found in a consignment of South African citrus, resulting in a temporary disruption in the export programme and increased surveillance by United States Department of Agriculture inspection teams. Mr Valli assured growers that the United States fully supported their export programme to the United States. "It is the intention of the US Government's African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) to encourage and assist exports from the continent to the United States. We are still on track with negotiations for a free trade agreement which will entrench the benefits that South African growers now enjoy under AGOA and which will place them in a far better position."

Mr Valli said he was impressed by the way in which the whole farming community is benefiting from the citrus export programme to the United States.

Responding to Mr Valli's comments Mr Piet Smit, CEO of USA

Producers' committee, said that the export programme to the United States represented a lifeline to growers in South Africa.

"We will struggle financially, perhaps fail altogether, if we cannot grow, pack and export our citrus fruit to the USA and if we have to depend only on non-USA markets."

He said that exports have grown from a mere 600 tons in 1999 to 41 000 tons five years later, with a turnover of around R330 million. "We expect our export volume to be very similar this year compared with last year, but are hoping to increase turnover by 12% to about R370 million."

He says success has not come about easily and that much needed to be done to ensure the long term success of citrus exports to the United States. "We need to streamline the programme and remove some of the risks, particularly those arising from strict phyto-sanitary regulations, a long and costly supply chain, anti-trust laws in South Africa and the United States and the difficulties caused by FCM."

South African industry spokesman says that the recent problems with FCM have clearly proved how effective the South African cold sterilization programme is to prevent any live larvae reaching the United States. "The integrity of our programme has been protected and we are extremely grateful for the excellent support and cooperation we have had from the US Embassy and Counsellor offices in South Africa, the USDA/APHIS teams in the USA and South Africa and the South African National Department of Agriculture," says Mr Smit. "This led to a quick resumption of sales and we are now looking forward to a good season."