Mitchell Brooke

The logistical and infrastructural requirements of the rapidly expanding South African citrus industry prompted CGA to create a new logistics co-ordinator post to investigate what the industry’s current and future requirements for export will be and to work proactively towards achieving these. Mitchell Brooke has been appointed as CGA’s Logistics Co-ordinator and answered the following questions.

LOUISE BRODIE REPORTS

What is your background and how did you become involved in the citrus industry?

I am from Durban and have been involved in the logistical side of fruit exports for many years. Since 2000 I have worked in the Port of Durban in various positions including vessel project manager for Fresh Produce Terminals, running the Durban port operations for Capespan and managing Maydon Wharf Fruit Terminal.

What does your job entail?

I started with CGA in April and the first thing that we did was to check the capacity of the current infrastructure available to handle the volumes of fruit shipped out of all South African ports (Maputo in Mozambique also ships citrus from South Africa and this port has been included in the study) and collate this with the planting data to see what the expected productions will be over the next four to five years. From the results it is quite clear that volumes are set to increase further and will exceed the capacity of the infrastructure that is currently available. We have already seen a massive increase in volumes through our ports since 2007 and at the same time there has been a huge movement away from reefer vessels to container shipment.

How is this significant to the citrus industry?

This is a huge challenge to all the stakeholders in the citrus industry and we are currently compiling an industry logistics and infrastructure project document to tackle critical industry problems. Investment in infrastructure needs to come form both the private and public sector. Our detailed information allows us to monitor how the volumes are flowing through the ports and to create an awareness of the challenges back to all the industry stakeholders. This also enables us to predict where problems are likely to arise and to advise the relevant parties in advance. The increased awareness could assist stakeholders to plan for contingencies and thus optimise the efficiency of their infrastructure. There has been some resistance to allow CGA access to logistics information, but we hope that this will change in future once stakeholders view the CGA logistics initiatives more positively allowing the centralization and coordination of logistics information activities. The nature of the citrus supply chain is evolving rapidly and therefore awareness is paramount.

Clearly this job is dealing with huge challenges and although this also creates a huge personal challenge for me, I enjoy going forward with these issues and creating awareness within the industry. There has traditionally been a lack of co-ordination on the logistics and infrastructure issues in the industry since deregulation and this position will create the opportunity to address this.

Do you have a message for the readers out there?

On the port side of operations there seems to be a lack of focus on the product. People don’t always know or consider the product inside the boxes that they are handling. The perishable nature and susceptibility to damage of the citrus is not always taken into account while it is moving through the port. Maintaining the cold chain meticulously and strict adherence to the correct handling procedures is vital to the final product of the fruit when it reaches the consumer.

The current trend is seeing margins to producers decreasing as input costs escalate more rapidly than returns. If we are able to reduce the cost of logistics this would be of great benefit to our producers. Keep an eye on the CGA website for updates on these projects at:

www.cga.co.za