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Criminals plundering lemon orchards in Sunday's River Valley

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Lemon orchards in the Sunday's River Valley in the Eastern Cape are being plundered by a highly organised criminal network, according to the Democratic Alliance's Vicky Knoetze, a member of the province's legislature.



Photograph by: <http://images.craveonline.com/>

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She said on Sunday millions of rand's worth were being stripped from orchards in the valley using 30-ton trucks and bakkies that were driven into the orchards at night.

"Export-quality lemons are being targeted, which can sell for more than R10,000 a ton," Knoetze said, adding that the criminal activity was putting thousands of jobs at risk and must be stopped.

She said that on Friday, she and DA Shadow MEC for Safety and Security, Bobby Stevenson had visited the station commander of the Addo police station to impress upon him the urgency of bringing the syndicate to book.

"We also asked him to refer this matter to the Hawks as this is obviously a highly organised operation." Three weeks ago, a farmer had an entire lemon orchard stripped at full moon, to the value of R3-million. He is one of a number of farmers who have been victims of the syndicate, Knoetze said.

"Desperate farmers are extremely unhappy with the lack of police progress in this matter, hence the visit by the high-powered DA-delegation. The farmers have complained bitterly that police refuse to open cases, due to the nature of the crime.

“After the visit of the DA-MPLs, the South African Police Service (SAPS) have agreed to open cases. The commander informed us that they should have opened cases.

“The DA calls on the SAPS to pull out all stop to bring this syndicate to book so that jobs in this area won’t be jeopardised. The citrus industry is the second largest contributor to the economy of the Eastern Cape. The opportunities that this creates must be protected at all cost.

“I will be facilitating a meeting between the farmers and the SAPS next week. I have asked my colleague, Bobby Stevenson, to assist in following up this matter with the SAPS on a provincial level,” Knoetze stated, adding that safety and security and economic growth went hand in hand.

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