

Fruit industry carries heavy cost of drought

The continuing drought conditions, which is specifically impacting the Northern Provinces, Berg River, Wolseley, Tulbagh, and Ceres (including the Koue Bokkeveld) production regions, have been of concern to the deciduous fruit industry as a direct loss of R720 million has been estimated.



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These areas have started implementing a drought management programme with reference to irrigation quantities and scheduling. Orchards are prioritised in terms of water requirement and risk, as well as the reduction in crop loads. Due to this, orchards are not receiving the full required amount of water in an attempt to see the crop through to harvest.

The irrigation buffer in these regions for next season is also depleted and water table levels of boreholes will not be sustained at current abstraction rates. Hence the impact may not just be on the current crop, but will spill over to the next season if good early winter rains does not fall by April/May.

Climatic conditions exacerbating the situation

It is, however, not only the drought conditions that are cause for concern, but also the associated climatic conditions (heat waves and strong winds) that further aggravates the production regime. Ceres, Wolseley and Berg River areas being the worst affected, are currently experiencing some crop losses due to these water shortages and heat waves.

The Klein Karoo and Langkloof areas have enough irrigation water, but the heat waves have caused some quality problems. The overall volumes, quality and size of fruit however, remain good. The Elgin, Grabouw, Vyeboom en Villiersdorp (EGVV) region also has enough irrigation water for now, although dam levels are below average. There has also been some quality issues due to the heat waves but due to new plantings coming into bearing a higher crop than in 2015 is expected.

More issues spilling from heat wave conditions include an increased ripening rate on early stone fruit varieties, problematic colour development on premium blush and bi-coloured varieties due to higher night temperatures, and an increase in pest and chemical control.

Climate projections

Current Western Cape climate projections for 2050 indicate more hot and fewer cold days, more heat units and fewer chill units, increased evaporation, a reduction in winter rainfall, both increased and decreased mean annual rainfall, and a good likelihood of more intense precipitation events.

Looking forward, bigger dams are required to increase water storage capacity to catch water during times of high rainfall. Increased investment in production infrastructure (e.g. netting) to prevent sunburn and to yield bigger fruit and crops will also be required. These measures will however increase establishment cost which many of especially the smaller producers will be unable to afford.

Research and development on drought resistant rootstocks and production methodologies will need increased focus (e.g. netting combined with mulching, irrigation efficiencies, etc.). National crop and/or disaster insurance would also be a priority, as more extreme conditions are approaching and emerging producers are especially vulnerable. Despite all this, the overall quality and eating quality of fruit remain good and not all regions are negatively influenced. Most regions still predict a very good season.

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