SA fruit farmers invest for survival amid load shedding woes

As the country regularly plunges into load shedding and with 2023 being the worst year on record for South Africans enduring power cuts, the fruit industry – which is heavily reliant on consistent energy for both irrigation and packhouse and cold chain integrity – has had to become more independent and invest considerable resources into ensuring the sustainability of its operations.

Source: igorsinkov via Fotolia

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"We are seeing a massive impact on the country's fruit industry, starting from the nursery level and extending to all parts of the supply chain," says Culdevco's GM, Mishkaat Anderson. "Load shedding causes frequent disruptions in irrigation and refrigeration systems which impacts fruit quality and size, agroprocessing , as well as farmer and worker livelihoods – it affects both domestic production and our export competitiveness."

The shocking costs of Eskom's failure

Some of Culdevco's fruit tree nurseries, for example, have reported a 45% drop in sales due to load shedding as producers have cancelled their planned farm expansions. They also report a doubling of their monthly energy costs as diesel and generators are used to keep operations going.

A large apple and stone fruit farmer in Limpopo who farms over 40 hectares and provides fruit to both the local and export markets said that the impact of the energy crisis on his farms has been severe. As all fertiliser inputs are done through irrigation, when there is load shedding, 75% of the trees are not irrigated on time and they have had to invest R4.4m into solar power – and that is on just one of his farms.

On another, they use their generator for irrigation and during stage 6 load shedding it costs the farmer R3,750 per day. When it's peak season and the packhouse is needed for processing, the diesel costs R6,250 per day during stage 6.

Another export stone fruit producer farming 30 hectares outside Paarl in the Western Cape says he has spent R1,2m to get his packhouse onto a hybrid system with an inverter and solar panels and will be spending close to another million on more solar panels and a transmission line to load shed-proof his irrigation.

Digging deep to survive the crisis

"Across the industry, we are seeing that farmers have to take matters into their own hands and divert considerable resources if they can ensure the survival of their operations," says Anderson. "In terms of exports and South African harbours, the fruit industry is very involved in ensuring that the harbours are exempt from load shedding, especially during peak season times.

"It's tough on the agriculture sector right now and it is compounded by the challenges of previous seasons which saw increasing fertiliser and diesel costs. However, I also see that South African farmers and producers are robust and have a resilient attitude. We just need to collaborate more and ensure that we provide mitigating actions that support the longevity of the industry.

"Although the agriculture sector only contributes 2.57% to GDP, the fruit industry employs approximately 300,000 people directly on farms and contributes to the nation's food security - we need to ensure that we maintain and improve this number," says Anderson.

Planning well is the key to success

Load shedding solutions such as diesel generators, solar power, lithium batteries and elevated dams for storing water are solutions being discussed and utilised across the agricultural industry, with investment in water elevation being one of the most cost-effective and sustainable investments over the long-term.

Experts consistently state that having a comprehensive energy strategy in plan appears to be key for long-term stability and that producers need to prepare for not only ongoing load shedding in the future but also the possibility of bigger stages impacting their operations.