

Drought hits Cape citrus farmers hardest

As the drought continues and with weather forecasters not foreseeing prospects of good rains in the coming three months, farmers in the Eastern Cape, one of the six provinces already declared a disaster area, fear the termination of their long-term supply contracts with retail outlets, with some moving their operations to other areas to retain relationships.

Livestock and citrus farming are the main agricultural activities in the Eastern Cape, and the province is South Africa's largest exporter of citrus fruit.

Garth Sampson, of the Port Elizabeth weather office, says the seasonal weather forecast works in a three-month circle ending in July, and it does not look good.

"It is showing normal to below normal rainfall. What we need now is widespread rain of 50mm or more to make a difference to our main storage dams. It must be widespread and not concentrated only in one area," says Sampson.

This week the Kouga Dam, which is the main supply dam, was only at 10.5% capacity.

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The Sundays River Citrus Company (SRCC), just outside Port Elizabeth, is the largest grower, packer and exporter of South African citrus.

During a good harvest, it exports 10 million cartons of citrus. This is reduced to seven million cartons during a bad harvest. The SRCC has lost between R1 billion and R1.5 billion in revenue because of the drought.

Hannes de Waal, SRCC chief executive, this week told City Press they supply retailers and wholesalers countrywide and export to "all over the world".

"The drought affected us negatively in 2017. We experienced enormous fruit drop on navels, small fruit and lemons, with the warm berg winds causing damage to late crops. We only shipped seven million cartons.

"Our exports have been reduced by 33% because of the drought. We did not lose our international markets as we worked well with our customers, but they were

equally affected," he said.

De Waal said the SRCC employs about 40 000 people directly and "a lot more indirectly".

"Because of the drought, pickers and packers were probably reduced by about 20% or more," he said.

With a membership of 96 growers, De Waal said they did not receive assistance from the government to alleviate the challenges caused by the drought.

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The company has a successful empowerment project in which it brings in rural communities by asking them to form cooperatives and mentors them to start their citrus plantations.

Agri Eastern Cape, which represents about 3 000 commercial and small scale farmers in the province, says the most affected regions are Hankey and Patensie, commonly referred to as the Gamtoos Valley, which is big on citrus and vegetables, and the western region, which specialises in livestock farming.

Gamtoos Valley farmers depend solely on irrigation.

"If we do not receive rain by June, the situation will be dire. The quality of the fruit and vegetables is affected if we do not get good rain. The same applies to the livestock," said Agric EC president Doug Steyn.

"The western region is a livestock area and grazing pastures have been badly affected. This also affects the productive stock and the calving is poor."

Pierre Joubert, chief executive of the Gamtoos Irrigation Board, said about 50% of South Africa's citrus comes from the Gamtoos area.

"There will be financial losses for farmers, but the bigger problem is the social impact the drought will have on the communities in the valley. More than 10 000 people are employed across the farms in the area, and their families rely entirely on farming," said Joubert.

He said if farms were to close down, this would have a huge impact on the surrounding towns of Humansdorp, Loerie, Patensie and Hankey, which

collectively have between 50 000 to 80 000 people working directly or indirectly in the agriculture industry in the area.

Most of the citrus from the Gamtoos Valley is exported to the European Union, US and the Middle East.

Petrus du Preez, chairman of the Gamtoos Agricultural Association, said a national water plan needs to be put in place by national government.

“The scale of the problem is such that only on a national basis can something be done to prevent a crisis like this in future. All we can do at this point is pray that summer rains eventually arrive to alleviate the drought,” said Du Preez.

“Fruit and vegetable farming is completely dependent on irrigation, and district farmers have largely abandoned vegetable crops in favour of citrus. Agriculture is the main economic activity in this region.”

In a report motivating for the Sarah Baartman district to be declared a disaster area, the provincial department of rural development and agrarian reform said the total number of livestock which could be affected by the drought is 5.4 million.

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According to the department’s report: “The total number of animals vulnerable to the negative impact of the drought in the province is 1 353 980 cattle, 3 081 573 sheep and 969 275 goats. Therefore, the province is compelled to implement drought relief measures to save a total of 5 404 828 animals [cattle, sheep and goats].”

Responding to written questions from City Press, rural development and agrarian reform department spokesman Mvusiwekhaya Sicwetsha said agriculture in the province contributed significantly to the national GDP.

Sicwetsha confirmed that the western region of the Eastern Cape was the most affected by the drought.

“A total of 967 farmers were affected in the western region. Of these, 58% were small scale farmers, 32% were subsistence farmers and 10% were commercial farmers. The affected grazing area in the same region was more than 99 000

hectares," he said.

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