Charlene Grant – Rederberg Estates

Big bump in Indian demand for South African soft citrus despite 30% tariff

Rederberg Estates in Hoedspruit would, in a normal year, have finished picking and packing mandarins by this time, leaving them to focus on their last crop, Valencias.

This is not a normal year. Yesterday winter rain fell in this subtropical district, and they've had to suspend harvesting for a few days. Abnormal summer rainfall had held back lemon picking, the effect spilling over, and they've been catching up ever since.

"We should finish up our mandarins this week. There has been more demand for South African soft citrus due to the eating quality, but sizing of the fruit has played a big role in accessing this demand. The eating quality of South African soft citrus has been very good this season," says Charlene Grant, export manager at Rederberg Estates.

In-transit cooling of fruit to India is, after years of industry lobbying, an option to fumigation with methyl bromide. For years, citrus had to undergo land-based cold treatment in South Africa before being loaded for India or be fumigated. Despite that hurdle, plus the high import tariffs that India levies on South African citrus – 30% except for grapefruit's 25% tariff – exports to India have significantly grown.

"More orders than ever before came in from Indian buyers this season," Grant says. "We're hoping this trend holds. India is an excellent market to take our soft citrus and rapidly growing: there are many young orchards planted yet to come into production."

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The rush of orders from India pertains to soft citrus, not so much to hard citrus, and this reflects a conundrum at the moment: young generations appear to have lost their patience for 'slow fruit' like oranges (and grapefruit) and prefer the more convenient eating fruit.

"We're facing a very difficult situation in that it seems to me like mandarins are exerting a negative influence on the Valencia market," she observes. When soft citrus is on price promotion, she notes, it doesn't take much to convince consumers to take two bags. Whereas when the promotion is on oranges, they're much less keen to double up their purchases.

Processing Valencias not wanted in the Middle East this season

The other conundrum is, ironically, their excellent yield this season. "It is an on year, and the production looks fantastic. Everyone's volumes are up. That means you have 120% of a normal season crop while your market only wants 80% of their usual demand. That's where we're finding ourselves this season on oranges, and on grapefruit as well."

Due to the mismatch between yield and demand, they're left with roughly 40% of the crop to distribute anywhere they can.

"When I'm talking to our buyers in the Middle East, they're telling me that the markets are uncharacteristically empty. Normally the elite would escape the heat this time of year, leaving behind the working classes. But they are also absent from the market. Demand has plummeted as a result of the war."

Rederberg's other crop is mangoes, which are even more dependent on the Middle East (80% of their crop typically goes there), and they're biting their nails for the upcoming season in December. "If we don't have our markets in the Middle East by the time mangoes roll around, we're going to run into difficulties. We have far too many mangoes for the domestic market to take. Our area alone would flood the local market with mangoes," she says.

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Back to citrus, and they've been managing to get fruit into the Middle East, but can the fruit pay the cost of the journey? Processing Valencias can't, and so they've had to be sent somewhere else – Europe seems the obvious alternative, but as a result of the abnormal rainfall, it's also a year with many citrus black spot (CBS) incidences, despite the industry's unflagging vigilance. This year CBS started cropping up at the start of the season already.

They've not themselves had any CBS interceptions, she says, due to their huge effort to maintain that status. (In case of a CBS or FCM interception, the affected block receives a harsh penalty of the orchard being disqualified from EU exports for two years.)

A realignment of phytosanitary regulations between the UK and the EU is a worry, she says. "The UK has been assisting us with moving fruit not able to go to Europe due to CBS. The UK is an important part of the programmes that we service, not just because of CBS but also in spreading the risk when there is a lot of volume. In a season like this," she continues, "the UK has become pivotal to being able to export fruit and distribute accurately. Should they align on phyto regulations, this will become another challenge that the producers and exporters will have to find a way to manage."

Processing or juice fruit that cannot follow their usual route to the Middle East or Iraq and cannot go to Europe places further pressure on local juice factories. "We understand their challenges 100%. Everyone in the fruit industry, no matter what part, is feeling the pressure."

Everything has been coming at them at once: aberrant weather, a poor exchange rate, war and consequently high logistics costs, a truck driver strike on the Durban route. "This season – I've never experienced anything like it. Not in all my years in the export industry, and many people who've been doing it for longer than I have told me it's unprecedented. Almost unmanageable."

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Publication date: Thu 13 Aug 2026

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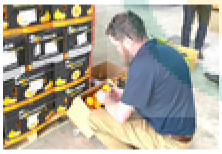

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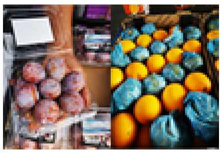

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