South African citrus growers face labour shortages as migrants leave

South Africa's unemployment rate reached 33.6 per cent in Q2 2026, representing about 8.5 million people, according to Statistics South Africa. Including discouraged jobseekers, the rate rises to 46.3 per cent. At the same time, citrus growers are reporting difficulties replacing migrant workers who have left the country amid anti-migrant protests.

Commercial agriculture has long relied on seasonal labour from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Lesotho. In Limpopo, citrus producers say they are struggling to recruit enough workers to pick fruit on time, raising concerns about harvesting capacity during the season.

South Africa's citrus exports generated about R45 billion (US$2.7 billion) in 2025, making citrus the country's largest agricultural export industry by value. Citrus is highly perishable and moves through a coordinated export chain. When farms cannot harvest fruit on schedule, produce reaches packhouses, refrigerated warehouses, trucking fleets, and ports later than planned. Export volumes can fall, while storage and transport costs rise.

The sector is also operating amid higher freight and fuel costs and disruptions to access to Middle Eastern markets. According to the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa, the Middle East accounts for about 19 per cent of South Africa's citrus exports, making it the country's second-largest market after Europe.

If labour shortages continue, reduced harvesting capacity could affect volumes supplied to exporters and the wider fresh produce supply chain. Lower volumes reaching wholesalers and retailers could also tighten domestic supplies and increase pressure on food prices.

The labour situation is adding another constraint for citrus growers already dealing with infrastructure shortages, rising costs, logistical disruptions, and weaker economic growth. For the citrus sector, maintaining sufficient seasonal labour remains important for keeping harvesting, packing, cold storage, transport, and export operations on schedule.

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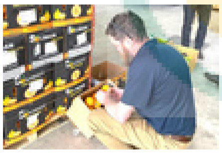

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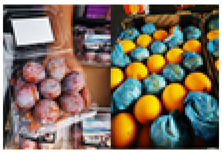

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