

South African citrus growers face water costs of up to R750 000

Emerging citrus growers in South Africa's Eastern Cape face water, financing, and infrastructure constraints despite gaining access to irrigation through joint ventures with established commercial farmers, according to research from Rhodes University.

Researchers Fenji Materechera-Mitochi and Matthew Weaver interviewed 34 commercial and emerging farmers involved in joint ventures in the Great Fish and Lower Sundays River area. The region contains land reform projects and commercial citrus farms producing oranges and lemons for export.

Under the partnerships, emerging farmers generally provide land and water rights, while commercial partners provide finance, technical expertise, equipment, and market access. The research found that emerging growers gained access to canals, pumps, and water from nearby dams, but often struggled with the associated costs.

Water and compliance costs can reach R750 000 (US\$46 300) before growers generate revenue, while citrus can take seven years or more to produce its first harvest. Some farmers lost control of allocated water rights because they could not meet payments.

Access to equipment is another constraint. Some emerging growers rent tractors and crop sprayers from commercial partners, adding costs and increasing reliance on those partners. Limited access to commercial credit without collateral or cash flow also restricts independent investment in irrigation infrastructure and farm expansion.

The research found that commercial partners frequently retain control over financial decisions, crop planning, marketing, and investment. Researchers said water access alone does not provide the finance, infrastructure, technical knowledge, market access, and management capacity required to operate a commercial farming business.

South Africa has introduced a new water pricing strategy that gives emerging farmers additional time to pay water bills. The researchers recommend that water pricing account for the period before new citrus orchards generate income and that joint ventures include mechanisms for transferring management skills and responsibilities to emerging growers.

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Source: foodformzansi.co.za (<https://www.foodformzansi.co.za/water-rights-alone-wont-fix-inequality-in-sa-commercial-farming/>)

Publication date: Wed 2 Sep 2026

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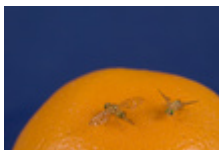
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