

Meteorologist urges population to watch daily forecast during “extreme” El Niño ahead

Heavy rain in Eastern Cape turns last citrus stretch into “a catastrophe”



© Carolize Jansen | FreshPlaza.com The rain disrupting the end of the citrus harvest in the Eastern Cape is compounding the most difficult citrus season most can remember. Little fruit has been harvested this week, with some days lost last week as well.

Tens of thousands of crates of lemons are still on the trees, as well as Nadorcotts, Tangos and Valencias. "This rain is a massive issue," says a citrus farmer, remarking that acid levels on particularly soft citrus are dropping to levels that can disqualify fruit from being exported.

Right: the last of the Sundays River lemon crop can currently not be harvested because of rain

"The prices are terrible, and with this untimely rain it's turning into a catastrophe," the Sundays River Valley farmer observes.

Eight weeks ago, market information started filtering through indicating a very tough final stretch for the South African citrus season, he says, and with this sombre prognosis, on some farms picking teams were enlarged by more than a quarter to get fruit off the trees, but many farms are still harvesting.

Current springtime precipitation, even late snowfall on the eastern highlands, might seem to contradict the warning of an unusually potent El Niño ahead, but not so, as Dr Christien Engelbrecht, lead scientist at the South African Weather Service, set out at a media conference on the summer ahead this morning. "It is not uncommon for South Africa to get rain from cutoff lows in springtime during El Niño seasons."

The rain now, added Dr Johan Malherbe of the Agricultural Research Council, "is disconnected from what will come."

As the summer wears on, the likelihood of below-normal rainfall will increase, although, Prof Willem Landman of the University of Pretoria pointed out, even in El Niño, the country gets rain; it doesn't completely disappear. "Caution is warranted in attributing individual impacts over southern Africa to El Niño–Southern Oscillation."

"Event may reach a magnitude unprecedented in the instrumental record"

He calls this El Niño 'unique' because his team was able to predict it extremely early, before autumn already, by looking at the warming of an area the size of Africa within the Pacific Ocean. "The event is now a mature coupled ocean-atmosphere system, and it is rapidly intensifying."

The rate of warming is also unusual. "Current observations and forecasts indicate that the event may reach a magnitude unprecedented in the instrumental record," Prof Landman said. "It is unprecedented that we could predict this event with such a long lead. In February this year we could already predict there was something brewing we should worry about."

Prof. Landman continued that sea temperatures in this vast body of water are in excess of 31°C, 32°C. "Imagine seawater being that warm!"



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Farmworkers should rest 15 min every hour to reduce heat exhaustion

"With temperature forecasts, it's more certain: heatwave days are a real risk this summer," she said. "The probability of above-normal temperatures is very, very high. There's not much you can do when heatwaves come – it's what you've done before that will be important."

Celeste Madondo, a public health specialist working in the field of heat resilience at community level, referred to the death of table grape pickers in the Northern Cape during January 2023. She urged farmers to allow workers respite in shade or indoors for fifteen minutes every hour during heatwaves.

The Agricultural Research Council's Dr Johan Malherbe advises farmers to be conservative in their planting of annual crops to reduce losses and to conserve soil moisture through mulching and removal of alien vegetation in watercourses. He added that South Africans should expect "a big jump" in maize prices.

Dr Engelbrecht emphasised the urgency of following daily forecasts in this, as she termed it, "season of extremes. The whole country knows we're heading for drier conditions, but the daily forecast is really important this season to know what's happening."



For more information:

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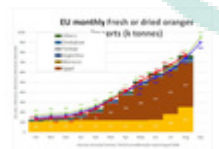
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