

Wild weather rattles South Africa

Northern citrus growers in South Africa battle with drought while nearby areas are devastated by floods

South Africa is a land of great contrasts, which has been clearly demonstrated this week by the paradoxical situation of massive flooding in some regions, while close by citrus growers are having to cut off their irrigation water to certain orchards because of a devastating drought.

The drought in Southern Africa has devastated agriculture from east to the west, with whole towns running out of drinking water some months ago and the corn crop fall well short of supplying the country's needs. Between 5m-8m tonnes of corn will now have to be imported.

Across the country people have been collecting millions of litres of drinking water to be distributed in stricken communities. The drought is affecting fruit crops from the Limpopo Province in the North, to apple, pear, citrus and stonefruit growers in parts of the Cape.

With high value crops such as fresh fruit, where trees have to receive daily irrigation in order to deliver fruit of the right size, quality and appearance, running out of water in the peak season is a disaster.

When the rains finally came, it came in patches and in such quantities that news of damage and loss of life are being reported from many regions. One such area is the Waterberg, north of Pretoria, and the Lowveld regions bordering the well-known Kruger National Park, one of the best known game parks in the world. Further south in the Free State the grain growing regions— which a short while ago resembled a desert — have had a good soaking which will hopefully bring new life.

In the vast Karoo south of Upington, rivers which have not been flowing in years became raging torrents and the open plains huge lakes of water in which children gleefully played. Yes, the kids of this region do not see much water and they make the most of it when it happens.

But sadly it has not yet rained in the areas near Tzaneen and Letsitele, a vast citrus growing region, barely 200km from the other Limpopo regions where flooding is causing loss of life.

Barend Vorster, well-known owner of Mahela Farm near Letsitele, says the rains just do not want to cross the mountains into the bushveld and Lowveld: "We had to turn off the water to some of our orchards and we will have less fruit, smaller sizes and in the end sit with dying trees if it does not rain soon."

Vorster notes the huge Tzaneen Dam which supplies consumers and the agriculture in the region, is now only 19 per cent full. "We are getting 20 per cent of our normal water allocation," he outlines.

Recently, when there was a good possibility of rain in this region, and down towards Hoedspruit, all that fell were massive hail stones which devastated mangoes, some citrus and avocado crops.

In the Cape, growers in Ceres face the same problems and hope that they will have a good winter rainfall season. There is also concern of the effect a shortage of irrigation water will have on the later crops.

More concerning is that if there are no good winter rains this year, there will simply not be water to produce the next crop. The immediate effect is that virtually all South Africa's fruit export crops will be down this year. By how much, only time will tell.