European farmers' PROTEST

Paul Hardman

At the time of writing, Paris was in a gridlock with hundreds of protesting French farmers. By Paul Hardman

Large tractors make for a formidable blockade. These protesting French producers are getting the attention of the Macron government, as well as leaders across the EU. South African growers should also be paying attention, given that the EU is still such an important market for Southern African export citrus.

Shifting politics and passions

EU farmer protests are intensifying, and these current actions are passionate and forceful. About two dozen French farmer arrests had been made at the time of writing. They reflect growing EU farmer discontent and desperation around three core themes:

Rising costs

Like producers across the globe, farmers in the EU are facing higher input costs. This is putting them on the back foot as governments and retailers try to contain food inflation. Margins are being squeezed. Their gripe with the EU government relates to adjustment in policies that directly change their financial situation, e.g., the phasing out of tax breaks for diesel fuel, which is part of the wider energy transition policy.

It can be noted that EU farmers have historically received a significant proportion of their farming income via subsidies through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In some cases, that subsidy is equivalent to about 35% of farm gate income. Because these subsidies are increasingly being coupled with green goals, the viability of EU farmers is under threat.

The Green Deal

Both Dutch and French farmers have taken to the streets to protest against components of the EU Farm-to-Fork strategy – the EU's plan to convert EU agriculture through "greener solutions". Again, the immediate impact of restricting fertiliser usage and removing crop protection product options, means that farmers are more vulnerable and subject to yield and income risk. There is no doubt that efforts to adopt "green solutions" are desirable and necessary, but they must be genuinely sustainable solutions based on good science. Using sustainability as a political football is simply not helpful.

On the back of government policy, the immediate associated concern for citrus producers in SA is when the EU retailers restrict crop protection products for SA producers – which is totally inappropriate, given the different mix of climate, and pest and disease pressure. Said restriction could have detrimental impacts on real sustainability. The reality is the current EU farmer protest will not escape the attention of retailers. More will have to be done by SA citrus producers to protect key crop protection options, and to demonstrate in great detail what is being done on farms to preserve and improve the environment. This will attract more administrative and financial costs.

Competition from imported product

In the context of rising costs, poor productivity, and the intense drive to produce food in a "green" way, EU producers feel threatened by imported product. With their backs against the wall, they are seeking ways to protect themselves – and this takes the form of targeting imported product. This is most unfortunate, as it's the consumer who ultimately loses with less choice and inevitably, higher prices.

So, EU products compete with imported products, and the EU is unlikely to be more competitive in some cases. This echoes the findings in research about the impact of the Green Deal. It shows the EU will more likely become a net importer of fruit and vegetables if the Farm-to-Fork continues as envisaged. One can see why this is unpalatable for EU farmers. Therefore, citrus producers in SA should expect more pushback from the EU regarding trade, as they face internal pressure from strong farmer unions.

Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm
A STORY OF RESILIENCE

Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm is owned and managed by Ntombentsha Gladys Metula, a dynamic entrepreneur who has established herself as a formidable citrus producer. By Nkwane Cano Mphahlele

Ntombentsha Gladys Metula

With a rich history and a bright future ahead, Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm embodies the spirit of resilience and growth that resides in the citrus industry.

Metula's journey in the citrus industry began in 1985 when she worked at Mountain View Citrus Nursery in King Williams Town. Over the years, she gained valuable experience working at various citrus farms, sharpening her skills in pest control, general farm work, and even establishing a preschool for farm workers. In 1992 tragedy struck when her husband passed away, leaving her to take over the management of Topkat Citrus Farm in Fort Beaufort. Despite facing challenges and unrest from farm dwellers, she persevered and continued to lease farms from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR).

In 2012, after navigating a tumultuous period, she found herself evicted from her previous farm. However, through years of engagement with the DRDLR, Metula was eventually allocated a 223 ha farm in the Sundays River Valley Municipality in the Sarah Baartman district. She entered into a 30-year lease agreement with the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD, the old DRDLR), with effect from April 2023, with the farm trading as Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm. The Department also supported the farm with moveable assets to assist with the day-to-day operations. Although the farm faced initial challenges, including a dispute with the previous owners and a prolonged period without electricity, Metula's determination and the support of DALRRD allowed her to start operations.

Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm currently has 13.6 hectares of planted citrus with varieties such as lemons, Valencia, and Navels, and uses the Sundays River Citrus Company packhouse that is 37 km away. The farm currently employs four permanent and nine seasonal workers.

Nkwane Cano Mphahlele

Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm had already prepared its fruit for export by the time Metula took over, but due to electricity shortages and irrigation challenges, the fruit quality did not meet export market standards and they had to sell to local markets.

This farm has immense potential for growth and success. With proper management and financial support, they also plan to replace some of the existing orchards, which are over 30 years old and yield just above 30 tonnes/ha. Metula envisions Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm becoming one of the best in the district within the next decade. A recent soil survey report conducted by the Land Use Management division of the Department of Rural Development and Agrarian Reform indicates that the farm has a potential for further expansion.

Metula envisions Thandi'z Sandkloof Citrus Farm becoming one of the best in the district within the next decade.