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Deciduous Fruit Industry Reeling After Devastating Storms and Floods



The deafening sound of torrential rain and raging rivers has been replaced by the buzz of chainsaws and bulldozers, as farmers and rural communities across the Western Cape and Eastern Cape begin assessing the catastrophic damage caused by recent storms and flooding.

Within a matter of days, roads, homes, orchards and critical infrastructure were washed away, leaving behind mud, debris, rocks and floodwater.

Several major access routes in the provinces remain impassable, including Michell's Pass to Ceres, which has been closed due to severe mudslides and rockfalls. In the Langkloof, the R62 and the road between Joubertina and Kareedouw remain closed.

Although emergency crews are working around the clock to restore access to Ceres, there are concerns that Michell's Pass may remain closed to heavy trucks and refrigerated transport vehicles for an extended period.

Directors: NDV Dicey (Chairman) - AG Petersen - CVDM Du Toit - CG Herbst - U Speirs
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Freight is currently being rerouted via the Touws River to the N1, which is partially open. This will result in substantial additional costs for producers and exporters.

According to Mariette Kotze, Hortgro General Manager for Support Services, the roads between Worcester and Villiersdorp, as well as the Franschhoek Pass, remain closed, causing supply chain disruptions.

“These impacts could put food security at risk for these communities. Shops are closed or operate on a cash-only basis. Without internet and electricity, people cannot access funds.”

Although a partial loadshedding schedule has been implemented in Ceres today, and there are ongoing efforts to open Michell’s Pass, the extent of the crisis is far beyond flood damage, said Calla du Toit, Hortgro Pome Chairperson.

The greatest crisis facing our production regions is the lack of electricity. “Yesterday (Thursday) marked the fourth consecutive day without power in Ceres, and early indications suggest it could take three to four weeks to fully restore the electricity supply,” he said.

The prolonged outage has severely disrupted daily life across the region. Schools are unable to operate due to the lack of water and electricity, while many teachers and learners in Wolseley are cut off from Ceres because Michell’s Pass remains closed. The same situation is unfolding in other production regions.

“In Prince Alfred Hamlet, the old-age home has been without water and electricity since Monday, and temperatures in Ceres are extremely cold at the moment,” said Du Toit.

“The impact is enormous, particularly on farms where families lack basic services. This has become a humanitarian crisis. Restoring electricity as quickly as possible would resolve many immediate challenges, but unfortunately, it does not appear to be a quick process.”

The economic impact on the fruit industry is equally severe. Ceres Fruit Growers, which employs more than a thousand workers, is reportedly spending thousands of rand per hour on diesel to keep cold rooms operational, while packing lines remain at a standstill.

“Workers have been at home since Monday because there is no electricity, and it is not safe to operate under these conditions. At the same time, people are trying to support their families without power. The circumstances are extremely challenging,” Du Toit added.

Hortgro Stone chairperson Charl Herbst, whose farm is situated outside Tulbagh, described widespread destruction across the province.

“It appears as though the entire Western Cape is staggering under the impact of the storm damage. Millions of rand worth of infrastructure has been destroyed, although the full extent is still difficult to quantify. The destruction is visible everywhere — from Tulbagh and the Breede River area to Wolseley and Bonnievale. It seems that communities close to rivers have suffered the worst damage.”

Bridges, roads, packhouses, pump stations, machinery, orchards and homes have all been damaged or destroyed. Farmworkers have also suffered significant losses, with some homes washed away entirely.

“Many agricultural workers are unable to report for work, which means severe income losses for farming communities,” Herbst said.

The stone fruit industry was already under significant financial pressure before the storms, largely due to poor export returns and ongoing logistical challenges at the Port of Cape Town.

“The primary reason for the poor prices this season has been inefficiency and poor management at the Cape Town harbour. The port brought the stone fruit industry to its knees this year, and just when we thought conditions could not worsen, these storms struck. The stone fruit industry simply cannot absorb another disaster and now finds itself in an extremely vulnerable position.”

Early reports from the EGVV (Elgin-Grabouw-Vyeboom-Villiersdorp) region indicate that, in addition to infrastructure damage, mostly due to storm wind, approximately 50% of the Cripps Red apple crop has been lost. Significant damage to the orchard netting is reported, with trees uprooted due to the collapse of tree support structures.

Meanwhile, damage assessments have commenced in the Langkloof region, which was hit by severe weather during the previous week.

According to Neil-Pierre Strydom, roads and infrastructure throughout the area have been extensively damaged or washed away, with landslides and collapsing dam walls, all of which will affect water storage in the coming season.

“Some producers received more than 1,000 mm of rain within a matter of days. Joubertina was left without water, and the R62 — the main route through the Langkloof — collapsed in three places. Producers in the region still had Cripps Pink and Cripps Red apples on the trees,” he said.

Farmers are now attempting to access orchards and transport remaining fruit to packhouses. According to Strydom, producers are prepared to repair roads themselves and are currently seeking permission from the South African National Roads Agency SOC Limited to proceed with emergency repairs.

Fruit that would normally be transported via the R62 and exported via Gqeberha and Coega will need to be rerouted via George.



Photos supplied by Charl Herbst showing destruction in the Tulbagh Valley.