HORTGRO
Growing Fruit IQ
Stone
home of the south african stone fruit producer

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SA stone fruit growers fuming after logistical blunders

Anger and frustration have reached a boiling point in the South African stone fruit industry after multiple logistical blunders and unprecedented wind delays caused massive financial losses for growers. While the impact of the wind cannot be denied, the industry's general view is that Transnet's recovery plan is not bearing fruit and that its effects are not being felt at ground level.

One very tangible example of the recovery plan that failed to materialise is Transnet's prioritisation of short-shipped reefer containers. The *ONE Resilience,* short-shipped 372 containers, leaving them behind in the stack because they could not be loaded in time. The next vessel, the *Kalahari Express*, again short-shipped 111 (78 reefer containers) of these containers. More than three weeks later, the last of these containers will hopefully be shipped on the *Santa Cruz*, but the damage has been done. It is growers who will foot the bill when this fruit arrives in export markets in poor condition. The value of the cargo from the last reefer containers is estimated at R20+ million.

For the past five weeks, combined shipments from all Cape Town port terminals have been dramatically lower than in the same period last year.

Wind delays have forced growers, exporters, and logistics service providers to truck fruit from Western Cape to Eastern Cape terminals and to Durban, at massive cost, to avoid delays in Cape Town. It is estimated that these additional costs have already exceeded R35 million this season. Shipments from the Eastern Cape have increased by 115%.

Adding fuel to the fire is the fact that Transnet cannot operate the 18 new rubber-tyred gantries (RTGs) at their rated top wind speeds, as the health and safety risks to operators working at wind speeds above 80 km/h were not adequately foreseen. This issue remains unresolved. Equipment breakdowns, particularly involving ship-to-shore cranes, also persist.

Quality claims are now starting to surface as fruit delayed at the Cape Town port reaches overseas clients. This will have dire financial implications for growers as payments are processed and the economic impact materialises.

The industry and individual role players will investigate ways to recoup the direct financial losses and quality claims from Transnet.

South Africa is suffering reputational damage and rapidly losing market share in foreign markets to competitors such as Chile. Its reputation as a reliable, on-time supplier of top-quality fruit is heading for the gutter.

Charl Herbst, Hortgro Stone Chairman and a stone fruit grower, is a clear example of the crisis:

"After short shipments on two vessels, I had to extract and import my fruit from the container stack at the Cape Town Container Terminal and sell it on the local market in an attempt to minimise the financial loss."

According to Herbst, all of this is compounding frustration, anger, and fear of what lies ahead in the coming weeks as volumes build towards the January and February peaks. "The average stone fruit grower simply cannot afford another year of losses caused by logistical failures. What we have witnessed thus far may well be the last straw that breaks the camel's back and forces growers out of business. This will have a significant negative impact on the rural and national economy and job security."

- "Short shipped" refers to a situation where a vessel can't load the full complement of planned containers in time and she has a hard sailing date and time. What wasn't loaded stays behind and must wait for the next vessel.