

Press Release

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Early season sets the tone for South Africa's 2026/2027 stone-fruit export crop

South Africa's stone fruit industry is entering the 2026/2027 export season approximately one to two weeks earlier than last season, with preliminary indications pointing to a mixed but generally stable crop outlook across the major stone fruit categories.

The season follows a relatively dry winter, but significant rainfall and storm activity during May improved water availability in several important production areas of the Western Cape.

With seasonal development currently ahead of last year, growers are closely monitoring crop load, fruit development and orchard water requirements. As this is an initial estimate, conditions over the coming weeks will continue to influence the final export crop.

Nectarines show strong growth

Nectarine production is currently expected to be 12% higher than last season (14.1m 2.5kg eqv. cartons), supported by continued investment in new plantings and the increasing contribution from younger orchards coming into production.

A notable feature of the current season is that nectarine development in the Western Cape is ahead of the northern production regions, which is unusual compared with the more typical progression between these areas. Newer nectarine cultivars are also supporting the production increase, as they generally reach full bearing more quickly than older plantings.

Strong fruit set has led to high initial crop-load potential in several areas. Early and effective thinning will therefore be important to manage crop load and support appropriate fruit size and quality as the season progresses.

Plum crop expected to ease

The preliminary outlook for plums points to a crop approximately 5-10% below last season's crop of 15.85 million 5.25kg equivalent cartons. Feedback on fruit set has been inconsistent across production regions and cultivars, making the current estimate less uniform than for some of the other stone fruit categories. Nevertheless, the overall indication at this stage is for a moderately smaller plum export crop.



Apricot production remains stable

Apricot production is expected to be broadly unchanged from last season (750 000 4.75kg eqv. cartons).

The area planted to apricots has stabilised over the past five years, while fruit is expected to be larger than last season. Fruit set has varied between production regions, but improved water availability is a positive factor in important production areas such as Ladismith and Barrydale, following the May storms. This is an improvement on the previous season, when water availability in these areas was more constrained and should support fruit development and sizing as the season progresses.

Peach crop slightly higher

Peach production is preliminarily estimated to be 4% higher than last season (2.7m 2.5kg eqv. cartons). Generally normal fruit set has been reported across the major production regions, although a lower export crop is expected for most cultivars in the Ceres area.

Cherry production expected to fall

Following a successful flowering period in the Western Cape, cherry production was affected by a period of extreme heat, followed by cold and wet conditions, which negatively impacted fruit set. As a result, the national cherry crop is expected to decline by approximately 10–15% this season, compared to last season's crop of 490 000 5kg equivalent cartons, which followed a near-perfect production season. In the northern production regions, harvesting has commenced at the usual time, while the Western Cape crop is expected to be approximately 10 days earlier than normal.

Looking ahead

While early seasonal development provides encouraging indications of crop potential, the industry remains mindful that the preliminary estimate can still change as fruit develops and weather conditions unfold.

The earlier season also places greater emphasis on timely orchard management, particularly crop-load management and thinning. At the same time, exporters will need to monitor market conditions closely, including continued uncertainty in the Middle East, which will create additional challenges during the season.

Overall, the preliminary outlook reflects a stone fruit season developing earlier than last year, with growth in nectarines, stable peach and apricot production, and a somewhat smaller plum and cherry crop. Hortgro will continue to monitor crop development, weather conditions, water availability and market conditions as the season progresses.