

Hailstorms cause huge crop damage

Unseasonal downpours and hailstorms that caused flooding in many parts of the Western Cape during the 16-17 November resulted in massive crop losses. Some farmers have not yet been able to ascertain the full extent of their losses.



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Hail damage on fruit farms in the Ceres area has not only destroyed a large percentage of South Africa's apple and pear crop for 2014, but seasonal farm workers will also be affected.

Charles Hughes, managing director of Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing, said the greater Ceres area was affected, with the Witzenberg Valley being the worst hit by the hail. Around 38% of the country's pears and 28% of its apples are produced in the Ceres area. Some farms in the Wolseley area and along the mountains towards Worcester also suffered severe losses due to the hail.

Assessing damage



Charles Hughes, managing director of Tru-Cape Fruit Marketing

"It is difficult to give an exact figure of how much fruit has been destroyed, because farmers are still in the process of assessing the damage. In the Witzenberg Valley the crop of some farms is 90% damaged, with the average in that area being between 40% and 50%. Roughly 45% of Tru-Cape's apple and pear intake comes from Ceres and the surrounding areas. The loss in supply to Tru-Cape is likely to amount to 2.5 million cartons (of 12.5kg each)," said Hughes.

The full amount of fruit destroyed by the hail was likely to amount to five million cartons, and the total financial damage to the industry was estimated to reach R500m. Most of this loss is not covered by insurance.

It was too soon to speculate on what the impact of these crop losses would be on local and export fruit prices in the coming season. There would be a shortage of fruit for the export market and an increase in local supply, which could result in a decrease in local fruit prices.

Job losses

Rossouw Cillié of Laastedrif Farming in Ceres, recently named Farmer of the Year for 2013 by the Agricultural Writers of South Africa, said they were lucky to experience limited hail damage on their farms in the Bo-Swaarmoed region near Ceres. But Cillié, who is a grower for Tru-Cape and a director on its board, said a farmworker-owned farm on the outskirts of Ceres in which he holds a 40% stake was severely hit, with up to 45% of crops lost.

Hughes pointed out there is another dimension to the impact that these events will have on the fruit industry, explaining that crop losses would translate to fewer employment opportunities for seasonal farm workers later in the season. "There will definitely be a decline in employment at farm level as a result of the smaller harvest and orchards that won't be prepared for the fresh apple and pear markets, but only for juice."

Economically, many businesses in the area will also be negatively affected, encompassing the supplies of fertiliser, chemicals and packing material, as well as support services, Hughes added.

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