

Power cuts leave fruit farmers in despair

By [Wendell Roelf](#) and [Kopano Gumbi](#)

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On the cusp of harvesting this season's first fruit, deciduous farmer Heinie du Toit frets as the worst power cuts on record threatening to take the shine off his apple and pear crop destined for foreign markets.



A worker looks at apples at Remhoogte farm where they need a steady electricity supply for an automated irrigation pump network that sprays thousands of trees heavy with fruit, in Ceres, South Africa January 17, 2023. REUTERS/Esa Alexander

Situated in Ceres, one of the country's major fruit-growing regions around 120km (75 miles) northeast of Cape Town, the century-old family farm "Remhoogte" needs a steady electricity supply for an automated irrigation pump network that sprays thousands of trees heavy with fruit.

Too little water during the irrigation peak, from the end of November to mid-March, affects the size and quality of a wide variety of apple and pear cultivars, hitting produce and revenue as only premier grades are shipped to the European Union, UK, China and the Middle East.

"The trees have a certain need for water and if they don't get that water it's going to affect the quality negatively and then you can't export the fruit," Du Toit said.

A 10% reduction in exports from the farm may result in some R7.5m (\$435,600) lost revenue, Du Toit said, with lower grades destined for the domestic market and juice processors.

Daily power outages, which utility Eskom anticipates would continue for two more years at least, have hammered economic growth, fuelling widespread discontent among businesses and households.

"Many farmers said this is their last chance and if something doesn't happen very quickly they are going to sell their farms... It is a huge concern," Du Toit said as the steady throb of a diesel generator kicked in.

The fruit industry wasn't the only one feeling the squeeze.

Roughly 20% of maize, 15% of soybeans, 34% of sugarcane and nearly half of South Africa's wheat production was under irrigation, said Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist at the Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa, adding farmers had raised concerns about power cuts hitting output.

Impossible to farm

Cape Town vegetable farmer Carl Gorgens has given up on about half of his farming area because he cannot irrigate as frequently as needed.

"It's impossible to farm like this, to farm half the amount of seedlings in a season, when you're supplying supermarkets. I might as well stop and close the doors," said Gorgens.

Power outages are the latest setback following a drought, the Covid-19 pandemic, bottlenecks at ports and higher commodity prices, such as fuel and fertiliser, due to the Russia-Ukraine war, Du Toit said.

At the Bella Frutta fruit exporters' packaging warehouse in Ceres, two massive diesel generators help keep conveyor belts moving and cold storage units at -1.5 degrees Celsius.

Earlier in January, the pack house burnt through 5,000 litres of diesel in just under three days to keep operations running.

"We struggle to keep a constant cooling supply to our cold rooms," said Fransu Viljoen, engineering manager at Bella Frutta, adding it was frustrating to get up before the crack of dawn to reset the generators.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reporting by Wendell Rbelf and Kopano Gumbi; additional reporting by Esa Alexander in Cape Town; Editing by Olivia Kumwenda-Mambo and Vin Shahrestani.

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