By Justin Chadwick, CEO of the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa (CGA)

The southern African citrus industry has shown considerable growth over the past ten years – doubling export volumes to two million tonnes. Last year alone, citrus growers exported a record crop of 126 million boxes of fruit to more than 100 countries, which translated into more job opportunities, foreign exchange revenue and economic growth for the region

This growth has been made possible by a number of factors – not least of which is the vision of industry leaders in the 1970's who recognized the critical importance of research, and decided that the industry should be self-reliant in this space.

A property was donated by the Solomon family, specialized research infrastructure was developed and the necessary expertise appointed. In 1997 grower leaders once again recognized the importance of research when deregulation of the Citrus Board threatened industry research. In response, citrus growers in South Africa, Zimbabwe and eSwatini (formerly Swaziland) agreed to secure industry research personnel and infrastructure through the establishment of Citrus Research International.

This year, will see citrus growers once again confirm their investment in research and in the future of the industry as the CGA Board proposes a doubling of research investment for the next four-year levy cycle.

This research is essential in ensuring the sustainable competitiveness of the industry. Investment since the 1970s has put the citrus sector ahead of others in terms of market access.

However, with expected growth in the industry of a further 500 000 tonnes in the next three to five years (weather dependent), CGA members will need access to every available market to avoid oversupply of fruit and lower prices for the region's exports. Most of the growth is in easy peelers and soft citrus.

There has, however, also been an increase in demand for these citrus categories due to the convenience of easy peelers, and the health attributes associated with lemons (particularly in Asia). This positive trend should absorb the anticipated increase in supply not only from southern Africa, but most citrus-producing countries.

However, excellent research on its own is not sufficient to gain, retain and optimize market access. Protectionism has meant that in many target markets, politics is playing a bigger role than ever before. Whether that be through questionable science, barter trading or failure to respond timeously, the result is that market access applications take an inordinately long time to be processed and concluded. Most of these processes take in excess of ten years – which is just too long.

This is coupled with the fact that most countries will only deal with one application at a time, which means trading opportunities are lost. Unfortunately, international agreements and bodies set up to facilitate these processes have failed.

It is essential that governments agree on a quicker way of concluding these processes, while still dealing with valid pest risks. In order to ensure the Southern African citrus industry maintains growth in the fruit export economy, the South Africa, Zimbabwe and eSwatini governments are going to need to be more agile and aggressive in their market access negotiations.

An added challenge for southern African exporters is the performance of the South African ports, the road and rail infrastructure to carry fruit to these ports, and the shipping capacity to carry the fruit to its final destination. Insufficient investment in infrastructure and equipment has impacted on the efficiency and ability of all South African ports, which coupled with alleged corruption and labor problems has caused significant disruptions to the 2019 citrus exports.

These logistic constraints are being addressed at many levels, but time is short to sort out all issues before the commencement of the 2020 citrus season.

A further challenge is extreme weather events. These are a global phenomenon which experts advise are going to be more extreme and more frequent in the future. Fortunately, due to the wide geographical spread of growing regions of Southern African disruptions in supply from one region can be compensated from another.

In the fruit set period for the 2020 crop, the northern areas of the country, and sections of the northern and eastern Cape experienced extremely dry and hot conditions. While there were late summer rains in some regions, it is anticipated that Valencia and grapefruit volumes could be down on the previous season.

Reports indicate that the northern hemisphere citrus supply will be lower than in previous years, meaning an easy transition across to the southern hemisphere supply.

The CGA has taken a commodity approach to transformation. Through the work of the CGA Grower Development Company, new entrants are supported through technical, business, leadership and training services. The CGA also initiated the establishment of the Citrus Academy, focusing on youth development and development of skills necessary to keep the industry ahead of the curve.

Finally, last year saw the establishment of the World Citrus Organisation (WCO), which launch this week at the Fruit Logistica in Berlin. The WCO will concentrate on those issues that unite the sector, will result in better communication and information in the future, and will ensure there is more of a focus on the promotion of the global citrus sector.

The Southern African citrus industry looks forward to working with all its partners in 2020. Together, we will ensure the sustainable growth of the sector so that it continues to be a valuable source of income and jobs for the region.