

Large volumes of South African citrus that would have normally been exported via the Port of Cape Town are being sent to Eastern Cape ports in order to keep supplies flowing amid Covid-19-related delays.

The key Western Cape port's capacity has been severely impacted over recent weeks as a high proportion of staff has been affected by the pandemic, leading to a backlog of vessels outside the port.

However, citrus containers are being trucked to Port Elizabeth and Ngqura, which have been operating at full capacity, according to the Citrus Growers Association of Southern Africa ([CGA](#)).

In a newsletter, the organization noted that much concern had been raised at the start of South Africa's Covid-19 lockdown at the end of March over the reduction in capacity at the container terminals operated by Transnet.

There was initial disruption at all the four major exporting ports in early April - well before the start of the country's peak citrus production. But by the end of April, Transnet had boosted capacity at the Durban, Port Elizabeth and Ngqura terminals to 100% and eliminated berthing delays, the CGA said.

This was done by applying strict procedures so safeguard the workforce while providing business continuity measures, it said.

"However, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the Cape Town container terminal which has only been able to operate at 50% capacity due to high numbers of staff being affected by the pandemic," the CGA said.

"Exports of citrus are continuing from Cape Town with the main focus on services to Europe, UK, Med, Russia and North America, however due to delayed berthing shipments are being delayed. Citrus containerized exports from the Western Cape are being trucked in high volume to Port Elizabeth and Ngqura for exporting to ensure continuity in supply to markets."

The main European continental services provided by MSC and the SAECS VSA provided by Maersk, Safmarine, DAL, ONE Line and Hamburg Sud have recently started omitting Cape Town, with the port being serviced by these lines with alternative services.

"This is deemed a much more conducive measure to keep the supply of citrus consistent," the CGA said.

"Transnet are in the process of gearing the Cape Town container terminal to reach 100% operating capacity and this should be achieved quite soon with the main backlog of vessels being cleared over a short period of time (many vessels are bypassing Cape Town so the vessel backlog is only 6 vessels at this time).

"The conventional breakbulk service provided by the Reefer Alliance (Seatrade and Baltic Shipping) has been operating without any delays and a vessel a week is calling Durban, PE and Cape Town for shipments to Europe and Russia."

Conventional breakbulk shipments to Japan and China are continuing unobstructed from Durban and to the U.S. from Cape Town.

The CGA says it now has a "much more optimistic outlook", expecting that supply of citrus from South Africa will continue unobstructed and with "relative consistency as production enters the peak season".