

Expert: Cape farmers lose 25% of orchards, vineyards as result of drought

Drought-stricken farmers in the Western Cape have had to abandon at least a quarter of their high-value vineyards and deciduous fruit orchards because of a lack of water for irrigation. This has had a knock-on effect on rural employment, with the loss of about 30,000 seasonal farm worker jobs during the harvest season, UCT Professor Mark New has said.



Photo by Jesse Belleque on [Unsplash](#)

New, the director of UCT's African Climate and Development Initiative, was awarded the Piers Sellers Prize by the Priestley International Centre for Climate at the University of Leeds this week for his leading contribution to solution-based climate research. In a lecture, "The Anatomy of a Water Crisis", at Leeds University after receiving the award on Monday, New said the loss of this production would have a long-term impact on the agricultural sector, a major export industry in the region.

A video of the lecture was released on Wednesday.

A perfect storm

"So, what we have is a 25% reduction in this industry, which will only be incrementally increased if and when farmers can afford to replace those orchards and vineyards. They can't suddenly reinvest in 25% of the farm. They don't have the money to do that," New said.

Fruit and wine farmers usually replaced their orchards and vineyards in cycles, when the plants reached the end of their lifespans after 15 to 20 years.

But once the national government had cut off the water supply to farmers, when they had reached the limit of their drought allocation in late February, many of the deciduous fruit and wine farmers stopped irrigating those orchards and vineyards which were due to be replaced in the next five to six years. Many of these plants had died as a result. "So it has had an enormous effect," he said.

New spoke of a "perfect storm" of conditions that had led to Cape Town's water crisis.

De Lille 'really changed momentum'

Demand had increased and the Department of Water and Sanitation, responsible for bulk water supplies, had been incredibly reluctant to bring on additional water supplies in the Western Cape. New said this was because many other provinces had bigger demands in terms of water supply and sanitation. "So you can understand to some extent where the priorities of the national department lie, but it meant a delay, with the impending water scarcity looming in the background."

Also, the Department of Water and Sanitation was a very poorly run department that had run out of money, partly through wasting it and partly because of inefficiency, he said. In addition, the City of Cape Town's water managers had been rather complacent during 2017 and had thought the city would not get a third dry year.

"The narrative in the city was this was a one-in-a-400-year drought, so the chances were very, very slim to get another dry year. It shows they don't understand probability at all," New said.

The narrative around the drought had changed last year when Mayor Patricia de Lille had decided to take action by setting up a drought crisis committee. This had "really changed momentum" by getting the message out about the drought situation. "But, just as this was getting going, we had a political crisis in Cape Town where the mayor was accused of corruption by one of her colleagues... Effectively this meant there was political gridlock for about three months from October, November to December, while the ruling party was trying to get rid of the mayor.

"No decisions were made so all the technical managers, who were trying to install desalination plants, could not get permission to go ahead with getting the projects going," New said.

Dodged the bullet

However, Cape Town had managed to "dodge the bullet" of Day Zero this year because of the cuts to agriculture, water donations from farmers, and the huge drop in consumption by Capetonians.

New said that water managers now should be thinking that there is an almost equal chance of another dry year this rainy season. Water augmentation schemes would start to make a difference by the middle of this year, but if there were another dry season, these augmentation schemes would not be sufficient.

The region would need at least an above average rainfall this winter to get dams to a level where we would not have a Day Zero scenario at the end of 2018, or early 2019. The deep soils in the catchment areas were dry and would act as sponges soaking up rainfall.

Water managers would get an indication by the end of April if this winter was going to be dry or wet. "If rainfall in April is above average, there is a high probability the whole year will be above average. If low, there is a high probability that that pattern will persist to the end of the year."

This meant water managers would have an early warning system by the end of April, and certainly by the end of June, which would mean they could institute water demand management processes based on evidence, rather than wait until the

end of the rainy season to take stock.

Source: News24

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