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By Fred Meintjes

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## ***New windows force Hex hands***

Competitive supplies early and late in the season are leading to different strategies in the Hex River Valley



**T**he shortening of the marketing window for table grape growers in South Africa's Hex River Valley is forcing them to change their packing and marketing strategies – resulting in a greater emphasis on new, larger and more modern packhouses.

The new packhouse opened by Villion Farms, formerly known as AS Viljoen Farming, is a good example of the new state of the art facilities that are being developed in the Valley.

“Peru is affecting the start of the season and India is marketing increasing volumes in the traditional Hex Marketing period at the end of the season,” said Anton Viljoen (jnr), who is now in charge of the AS Viljoen business in the Hex River Valley.

“Our marketing window has over the past 11 years reduced from 25 to 12 weeks. That is why it has become important to have the kind of packhouses that will assist us to pack and ship the crop as soon as possible,” he explained.

He said that it had also become to expensive to constantly upgrade the

various packhouses on Villion Farms in the Valley to comply with various regulations and accreditations.

The new packhouse, which has been built close to the company headquarters, covers 6,000m<sup>2</sup>. There are precooling facilities, various packlines, and areas for loading containers and packaging material. There are also modern facilities for workers, while modern systems provide up to the minute information on the movement of grapes through the packhouse.

The consolidation of packing facilities is backed by an aggressive introduction of sought-after new varieties. “We have access to the SNFL and IFG cultivar ranges and our cultivar offer has become popular amongst international clients,” he said.

The grapes from Villion Farms are marketed by AS Viljoen Farming, which is now the Viljoen family's marketing company. “It is our intension to strongly establish our brand. We are specifically looking at South East Asia and China.”

At present 50 per cent of the volumes are

shipped to Europe, 25 per cent to the UK and 12 pr cent to the east. “We are of the opinion that, over time, we should reduce the volume to Europe to about 35 per cent, while the shipments to the east should increase by about 15 per cent,” he noted.

Viljoen says in the past more rapid expansion in the east has not been possible because the company has not had the right cultivars to do so.

“It is a niche market looking for extra-large berries of certain cultivars. We now have Midnight Beauty, Sweet Joy, Sweet Sapphire and Sweet Globe which will be suitable for this kind of expansion.”

Elsewhere in the Valley upgrading of older packhouses and the building of new, bigger facilities are noticeable. This will change the way the table grape growers in the valley operate.

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<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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