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By Fred Meintjes

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New SATI leader speaks

Anton Viljoen Jr has been elected as new chairman of SATI as the South African table grape industry steps into the future



Anton Viljoen

Anton Viljoen Jr, a member of the well-known Viljoen family from the Hex River Valley, has embarked on a period of service to the South African table grape industry.

Having been vice-chairman of industry organisation SATI for some time, Viljoen has now been elected as chairman for the next term.

"South Africa will continue to supply our traditional markets," Viljoen told Fruitnet. "We are however a growing industry and will soon pack 75m cartons for export. That is why we as SATI, along with our government, will continue to work to gain access to new markets."

Viljoen said that South Africa was particularly focusing on South Korea, Japan and the Philippines. "These countries are all in Asia and it is there where we see opportunities for South African grapes."

Over the past five years South Africa has

also increased its shipments to Canada, while "In the near future the USA will also become an interesting market for South Africa", he noted.

There is a high level of confidence in the future of the South African industry, Viljoen explained.

"We can already see from new planting and the orders of new vines at nurseries that South Africa will grow in production of table grapes over the next five years. A big focus from our growers will be to focus on our quality by protecting our crop with the use of permanent plastic covers and nets in risky areas."

It must also be noted that cost of production is increasing rapidly in the country while price levels in supermarkets have stayed the same for decades, with the industry therefore needing to focus on premium fruit while increasing production per hectare.

Covid challenges

"The rain was just too much with some

According to Viljoen, Covid-19 is probably the worst challenge the industry has ever experienced due to it being a global problem.

"All the growers, suppliers, workers and clients overseas have the same concerns," he said. "Our grape industry adapted very quickly by implementing all the protocols set out by the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as measures announced by our government."

One of the results of the pandemic is that there has been a shift to more punnet packaging and a focus on the supply of more grapes to supermarkets all over the world.

Wholesale markets appear to have struggled in some European countries, but this depends on the level of lockdown employed by various governments.

"Asia is presently a difficult region for us and we don't see the demand we

experienced in previous years," Viljoen

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explained. "We do see some movement to punnets, especially in Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore."

Mixed fortunes

The climate has been a big problem this season for the growers in the Orange River.

"It is the first time that close to all growers were affected by the rain during the same season in this 500km long production region," he confirmed.

farms measuring around 200mm of rain."

In the Western Cape things are just the opposite, with good conditions prevailing so far. After experiencing years of drought, growers in the Olifants River are having a very good season. Prospects are also good in the Berg River and the Hex River Valley.

"We have exceptional berry size in the Hex River Valley and the later regions will have a good steady supply for all our markets this season."

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