SATI
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WESTERN CAPE WATER RESTRICTIONS ADD PRESSURE TO TABLE GRAPE FARMERS DURING CRITICAL STAGE OF SEASON

[*19 November 2026, Paarl*] - The national government's announcement of a 15% reduction in agricultural irrigation water allocations in the Western Cape, following declining dam levels and below-average rainfall, presents an additional challenge for the province's table grape industry as the new export season gets underway.

The reduction, announced by National Minister of Water and Sanitation, Pemmy Majodina, on 16 November 2026, forms part of the Department of Water and Sanitation's annual operating assessment of the Western Cape Water Supply System. Domestic and industrial bulk water allocations will be reduced by 7%. The measures will take effect once formally gazetted.

SATI CEO, Mecia Petersen says, "Adequate water at this critical stage is vital for berry growth, sizing and ultimately the quality of export fruit. The timing of the announcement is particularly challenging, as table grapes have a year-long production cycle and growers have already finalised their planting and irrigation plans, leaving little room to adjust."

Carel van der Merwe, SATI's Berg River Regional Representative, says the restrictions could also have implications for South Africa's export competitiveness.

"International buyers have exacting requirements for grape quality, size and condition. If producers cannot meet the specifications they have already committed to, it puts their competitiveness at risk and could undermine importers' confidence in South Africa's reputation as a reliable supplier," he says.

Berg River growers face additional pressure

The Berg River Valley is among the table grape-producing areas expected to be affected by the restrictions, given its reliance on water supplied through the Western Cape Water Supply System. The region is one of South Africa's major table grape production areas, accounting for approximately a quarter of national export volumes in recent seasons.

Petersen acknowledges that water is a scarce resource and says the industry is committed to using it responsibly.

"Producers have invested significantly in more efficient irrigation systems, water-management practices, overhead plastics and protective netting to reduce water use and make every drop count. However, these measures require considerable investment and, while they have improved water-use efficiency, there is a limit to how far they can offset reduced water allocations."

South African Table Grape Industry NPC (registration no. 2002/024268/08)

Directors: Alwyn Dippenaar, Chairman | MH Vorster, Vice Chairmain | M Petersen, Chief Executive Officer | B Gosling | N Kirsten | M Paxton | M Steenkamp | CA van der Merwe | BR Viljoen

Van der Merwe cautions against overlooking the longer-term implications of water restrictions.

"Bud initiation, which determines the number of bunches the vines will produce in the next harvest cycle, takes place around this time. Prolonged water stress can affect vine health, reduce future yields and compromise fruit quality. This is not simply a matter of getting through the current season; it has implications for the industry's longer-term sustainability," he says.

Petersen also raises concern about the impact on growers' ability to plan and manage their existing water allocations.

"Farmers will have to make difficult decisions about how to distribute less water, including whether to reduce irrigation across all their vineyards or prioritise certain blocks at the expense of others. Neither option is easy, particularly when production plans have already been made and commitments to international customers are in place."

The financial pressure is compounded by other recent challenges. Growers in several of the affected regions were among those hit by the severe flooding in May, which required significant expenditure on repairs and recovery. This has placed additional pressure on already stretched farm budgets, at a time when further investment in water-saving infrastructure is becoming increasingly necessary.

Industry calls for a more measured approach

Petersen highlights the extent of the reduction imposed on agriculture compared with other water users, calling for a more measured approach.

"Imposing a greater percentage reduction on agriculture than on other water users places additional pressure on rural areas and an industry that makes a significant contribution to the Western Cape's economy, export earnings and employment. We therefore urge government to reconsider its decision and adopt a more measured initial reduction, with quarterly reviews of water availability and agricultural requirements before any further cuts are considered. This would give growers greater scope to manage their irrigation needs, while helping to protect crops already in production, farm jobs and the wider agricultural value chain.

Long-term water security remains a concern

Beyond the immediate pressures facing producers, the industry is increasingly concerned about the Western Cape's longer-term water security. Scientific evidence points to rising temperatures and drying trends in parts of the province, with higher evaporation rates and changing rainfall patterns placing additional pressure on water resources. Significant year-to-year rainfall variability further complicates water planning.

Petersen notes, "The Western Cape is becoming hotter and, in practical terms, drier. We cannot continue treating water shortages as isolated events that require short-term responses whenever dam levels come under pressure. These longer-term climate and water trends are well documented, yet we remain concerned that not enough has been done to put the necessary measures in place to secure the province's future water supply.

"We need a far more proactive and coordinated approach to water infrastructure, storage and the development of alternative water sources. Water security must be treated as a long-term strategic priority, rather than something addressed only when shortages become critical.

"Ultimately, this is about protecting the future of agriculture in the Western Cape. Producers need a reliable and sustainable water supply to maintain the quality of their crops, honour commitments to international buyers and remain competitive in global markets. Failure to address the province's water challenges will put not only farming businesses at risk, but also the jobs, livelihoods and export opportunities that depend on a sustainable agricultural sector."

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About SATI

SATI is the unified South African Table Grape Industry Association. All table grape producers are required to register with SATI, which is mandated by law as the industry's official levy administrator. The levy is required to fund and facilitate market access and development, research and technology, information provision, transformation, and training. SATI is dedicated to operating a partnership that strives to maintain South Africa's position as the preferred country of origin for retailers around the world. Contact: info@satgi.co.za