
Feature by Liesl Venter

# PPECB to launch pioneering digital solution

The Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB) is in an advanced stage of development of its digital cold chain container loading module, a world first, that could significantly reduce export administration delays by enabling export and phytosanitary certificates to be issued immediately after containers are sealed.

According to Vijan Chetty, general manager: coastal at PPECB, the digital platform will provide industry stakeholders with real-time information that supports faster, more informed decision-making throughout the export process.

"The PPECB has made significant strides in digitising the cold chain export value chain," he told *Freight News*.

The initiative will integrate cold chain, quality assurance and phytosanitary processes and validations into a single digital platform, providing end-to-end visibility and verification throughout the export value chain.

Chetty said the system had been specifically designed to address operational challenges, including the substitution or swapping of pallets during container stuffing. Through automated validations and real-time data verification, any pallet changes will be accurately recorded and validated without disrupting operations.

"This innovative approach minimises the risk of errors, prevents delays during container stuffing and supports the seamless movement of export consignments through the cold chain," he said.

The digitalisation initiative will also be expanded to facilitate the electronic issuance of export and phytosanitary certificates immediately upon the sealing of container doors, using cold chain container loading information.

> "We envisage that exporters will soon be able to obtain export and phytosanitary certificates on the same day that containers are loaded and sealed.
> – Vijan Chetty

"This marks a substantial improvement in efficiency, as these critical documents are currently issued up to five days after a vessel departs from South Africa," said Chetty.

He said the enhanced process would streamline export operations, improve traceability, reduce administrative delays and strengthen the competitiveness of South African exports in international markets.

"We envisage that exporters will soon be able to obtain export and phytosanitary certificates on the same day that containers are loaded and sealed, significantly reducing administrative delays and accelerating the export process," said Chetty.

The elimination of manual data capture is another major advantage, improving operational efficiency while reducing the risk of human error.

"It furthermore provides stakeholders with real-time visibility and statistics across the export value chain, enabling faster, data-driven decision-making and improved supply chain performance," he said.

The export notification data generated through the system is already being shared with key stakeholders, including Transnet Port Terminals and industry bodies.

The platform will next be expanded to incorporate container terminal monitoring at South African ports, providing stakeholders with real-time visibility of container movements and status updates within port terminals.

According to Chetty, once all components of the container loading module have been completed, the PPECB will begin the next phase of its digital transformation programme by developing an electronic solution for specialised refrigerated vessels. LV

# Quality of data as important as cargo movement

Record agricultural exports are placing new demands on South Africa's perishable supply chain, with the industry increasingly turning to integrated digital systems to improve visibility, traceability and efficiency.

The country recorded a new agricultural export record in 2025, with exports increasing by approximately 10% year on year, while agricultural imports rose by around 4% over the same period.

According to Leon Jansen, projects and development manager at ShipShape, much of this growth is linked to fruit and other temperature-sensitive products, resulting in greater volumes moving through already pressured cold-chain networks.

"This growth brings both pressure and opportunity. Practical logistics constraints such as ports, transport routes, reefer availability, cold-store capacity and seasonal congestion remain important, particularly during peak export periods," he said.

"But higher volumes also expose weaknesses in the way information moves with perishable cargo. The same data is often captured multiple times, information does not always move seamlessly between systems, certification processes can still be paper intensive, and there is often limited visibility of cargo status across the supply chain."

Jansen said this was why electronic export documentation was becoming increasingly important to cold-chain efficiency.

## Building visibility

Recent developments that have brought eCert administration under PPECB are expected to improve coordination between inspection, certification and export processes. Building on this, the Tracking Unit Manager (TUM) is emerging as a key eCert module for improving traceability across South Africa's perishable export chain.

TUM provides a shared record for pallet movement and status data that can be used by approved stakeholders in the perishable supply chain. For the cold chain, this represents a significant move beyond traditional pallet-out and pallet-in file exchanges towards a more integrated and traceable export process.

> "Industry participants need systems that can adapt to changing data requirements, integration standards and electronic documentation processes.
> – Leon Jansen

Jansen said one of the biggest opportunities lay in improving how information was transferred between the various participants in the cold chain.

"As cargo moves from producer to packhouse, cold store, forwarding agent, port and ultimately the export process, the quality and timing of data become just as important as the physical movement of the product," he said.

"A pallet, certificate, addendum, inspection result or shipment status must be immediately recognisable and usable by the next participant in the chain. Any breakdown in that flow can create delays, duplication and unnecessary administration."

## Tackling obstacles

According to Jansen, initiatives such as TUM are helping to address these challenges by creating a shared traceability layer across the perishable export supply chain.

"The value of TUM is that it creates a common source of information that can be accessed and used by multiple parties. This reduces friction in the movement of data, provided industry systems are able to connect effectively and organisations maintain accurate master data and timely status updates," he said.

Jansen said another challenge facing the industry was the increasingly technical nature of the perishable export environment.

"Farmers, exporters, cold stores and logistics service providers are all operating in an environment where digital integration is becoming a requirement rather than an option," he said.

## The next step

"As the TITAN and eCert platforms continue to evolve, industry participants need systems that can adapt to changing data requirements, integration standards and electronic documentation processes. For organisations without dedicated IT resources or specialised software, keeping pace can become a significant challenge."

He said logistics platforms and software providers had an important role to play in helping industry participants connect their day-to-day operations with the growing electronic certification ecosystem.

"Technology should simplify compliance and improve efficiency, not create additional administrative burdens. The role of software providers is to make these integrations as seamless as possible so that exporters and logistics operators can focus on moving cargo rather than managing data," said Jansen.

He said ShipShape's recently introduced Export Booking Module had been developed with this objective in mind, integrating perishable sea-export bookings with TITAN and eCert to eliminate duplicate data capture and provide a single workflow for users. LV

Opinion Piece

# Southern Africa's perishable trade growth hinges on efficient logistics

**By Shane Brennan, vice president: global policy, projects and partnerships, Global Cold Chain Alliance (GCCA)**

As we pass the midpoint of 2026, the global food supply chain remains resilient in the face of major disruptions domestically and in global trade. But we must not take this resilience for granted, and it is vital that industry and government work together to deliver the regulatory changes needed for safe and secure growth across our food industry.

Over recent years, southern Africa has experienced strong increases in perishable goods trade, a welcome trajectory for both economic strength and food supply resilience.

This has been made possible by temperature-controlled logistics. We are proud that cold chain operators have responded to demand with investments in temperature-controlled facilities and fleets, specialist skills and future-facing operations to meet customers' evolving needs.

Over the past six months, the growth path has been knocked off course by the disruption and uncertainty experienced by supply chains throughout the world. Trade costs have increased dramatically, driven not just by tariffs, but by an energy shock, shortages of food and fertiliser and military conflict in the Middle East. Africa has once more found itself in the middle of a great power trade tussle, with US action and Chinese and European counteraction.

These substantial changes are causing disruption and uncertainty, but also opening new opportunities, which nations are exploring through agreements such as South Africa's new Stone Fruit Trade Protocol with China and a reframed trading relationship with both the United States and Europe.

Southern Africa's ability to seize emerging opportunities to grow the trade in perishable produce hinges on efficient and reliable logistics and practicable, effective border processes. While the region's cold chain is successfully expanding, modernising and investing, border processes remain under resourced, cumbersome and inconsistent.

Southern Africa can lead the way by embracing a new approach that utilises technology to remove the friction points in current controls and inspections. An approach that would strengthen oversight and streamline processes.

By investing smartly in much-needed modernisation and digitisation, borrowing from global best practices and pushing ahead, African countries could build borders that make food trade safer, more resilient and far more efficient.

The reality is that overly people-reliant and paper-based trade processes are a nineteenth-century solution to a twenty-first-century challenge. Harnessing digital technologies would reduce delays, boost trade and improve security and sovereignty.

# Food and beverage sector buoys business sentiment

South Africa's food and beverage manufacturers are emerging as one of the brightest spots in the country's manufacturing sector, demonstrating resilience and helping to lift overall business confidence despite rising costs and supply chain disruption.

According to the latest Q2 Absa Manufacturing Survey, manufacturing confidence increased by one index point during the second quarter, making it the only major sector tracked by the Bureau for Economic Research (BER) to record an improvement in sentiment. Much of that optimism is driven by the strong performance of the food and beverage sector.

Sachin Chanderdhev, sector specialist for manufacturing at Absa Business Banking, said food and beverage manufacturers continued to outperform many other manufacturing subsectors despite facing the same cost and logistics pressures affecting the broader economy.

"The biggest positive sentiment is in the food and beverage market," he said. "It is a resilient sector because consumers still need to eat. They may cut back on other spending, but food remains a necessity."

The sector's strength is also reflected in capacity utilisation levels, with food and beverage plants remaining among the busiest in the country for several consecutive quarters. Manufacturers have maintained production volumes even as they navigate rising raw material costs, higher electricity tariffs and uncertainty across global supply chains.

For South Africa's cold chain industry, the performance of the food and beverage sector is particularly significant. Strong production activity translates into continued demand for temperature-controlled storage, transport and export services.

However, manufacturers are having to work harder to maintain momentum.

The survey found that input costs increased sharply during the quarter following a rise in global crude oil prices, which pushed up the cost of raw materials and other production inputs. Manufacturers have responded by renegotiating pricing agreements with customers and reviewing inventory strategies to protect supply continuity.

At the same time, logistics constraints continue to add pressure. Although South Africa's ports have shown signs of improvement, inefficiencies still force manufacturers to carry higher inventory levels and tie up additional working capital.

"When logistics and port inefficiencies exist, manufacturers need to hold more stock and order much earlier," said Chanderdhev. "That places pressure on working capital and cash flow."

For food and beverage producers, where product freshness, shelf life and delivery schedules are critical, efficient logistics networks remain essential. Delays at ports, disruptions to shipping routes and rail constraints can all affect supply chain performance and export competitiveness.

Despite these challenges, food and beverage manufacturers have shown a remarkable ability to adapt. Chanderdhev said the sector had developed a strong level of resilience after years of navigating disruptions ranging from Covid-19 and global shipping shocks to energy challenges and geopolitical instability.

Manufacturers have become quicker to respond to emerging risks.

Looking ahead, Chanderdhev expects food and beverage manufacturing to remain one of the strongest-performing sectors through the remainder of the year. LV

# 'SA a world leader in customs processing'

South Africa's cold chain sector currently has sufficient capacity to support growing export volumes, including the country's growing citrus volumes, but ongoing logistics challenges continue to place pressure on the efficient movement of perishable cargo.

According to Andy Connell of A-Bar-C Services, the industry has invested significantly in cold storage infrastructure over recent years and is well positioned to accommodate current and future growth.

"We have enough cold chain capacity at the moment and there is still room to manoeuvre," he said. "Whether it is fruit exports during the peak fruit seasons or frozen products, the storage capacity is there."

Connell said several industry players had continued to invest in new facilities despite difficult trading conditions. This comes as South Africa is now the largest citrus exporter by volume, while other sectors, such as poultry, are also showing exponential growth.

The investments being seen are also coupled with ongoing discussions about how facilities can be better utilised and how the industry can continue to grow.

While storage infrastructure is not currently a major constraint, Connell believes the biggest challenge facing the cold chain industry remains logistics fluidity, particularly around port operations and the movement of export cargo.

"The issue is not capacity. The issue is predictability and consistency," he said. "The port and shipping lines cannot always provide reliable schedules and stack dates, which makes it difficult for exporters and logistics providers to plan cargo movements effectively."

> Everyone expects the port to perform miracles, but the industry also needs to adapt its logistics planning.
> – **Andy Connell**

According to Connell, congestion is often exacerbated when exporters delay deliveries until the final days before vessel departure, placing unnecessary pressure on terminals.

"Everyone expects the port to perform miracles, but the industry also needs to adapt its logistics planning. If cargo is only delivered on the last possible day, it creates pressure that the port cannot reasonably be expected to absorb."

Despite these operational challenges, Connell believes South Africa compares favourably with many international competitors when it comes to cold chain compliance and digital systems.

He said the country's integration between industry, regulators and service providers had created a highly efficient environment for export documentation, inspections and cargo processing.

"With the PPECB systems and the level of digital compliance that has been implemented, South Africa is probably ahead of many of the world's major producers," he said.

"We are world leaders in areas such as customs processing, shipment bookings and digital documentation. Much of the customs clearing process can be completed electronically, provided there is connectivity."

While the country's cold chain infrastructure and digital systems continue to perform well, Connell warned that rail remained a significant concern for the long-term competitiveness of fresh produce exports.

He said the economics of fruit transport made it difficult for rail to compete with established bulk commodity and automotive traffic, which continue to receive priority due to their scale and year-round volumes.

"Transnet Freight Rail naturally focuses on commodities such as iron ore and coal because they generate substantial revenue and operate consistently throughout the year," he said. "Automotive freight also benefits from regular, predictable volumes. Fruit is seasonal and cannot compete on the same commercial basis."

The deterioration of rail means substantial investment requirements before it can become viable for fruit.

"The investment required is enormous and the returns are very long term. Even if someone wanted to enter the market today, it would take years before the necessary infrastructure and equipment were in place." LV