



When the Doctor is in, then Cape Town is out

Southeaster, on top of Covid, forces ships to bypass Table Bay

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● Is windy Cape Town getting windier? Definitely, according to freight handlers who report many large vessels bypassing the port partly because of wind-related delays.

Climate scientists have warned that the Cape's summer southeast winds (the notorious Cape Doctor) may get stronger because of climate change. But judging from port statistics this may already be happening.

Port stakeholders now arrange to keep produce fresh at an inland depot when the southeaster is pumping.

Port operations were halted for 74 hours last week because gales caused major delays and congestion, according to Western Cape Exporters Club chair Terry Gale. "This year the wind has been really, really relentless. You can imagine the impact that has: we are sitting in the middle of the fruit season."

The port has a 90km/h wind limit, above which all operations must cease. Huge volumes of fruit, mostly apples and oranges, are shipped overseas in late summer on refrigerated ships. Transport delays are costly and affect revenue on both sides of the supply chain.

Gale said wind was one of the major contributors to congestion at the port, where operations were already hampered by ageing infrastructure. Many ships now bypass the port to save costs – 34 so far this year.

Last year, between 160 and 180 sailed past after major shipping lines amended their routes due to berthing delays of up to two weeks at the height of the Covid-19 first wave, when staffing levels dropped to 40%.

Maersk, one of the world's biggest shipping lines, said the wind was a determining factor in finalising berthing schedules.

"We review our decision on whether to berth in a particular port on the basis of information on berthing delays, expected time alongside, time required to fully serve the vessel and anticipated weather impacts alongside," said Maersk Africa spokesperson Kerry Rosser.

The Cape Town scheduling had been affected by the wind, Rosser said. "We aim to offer a weekly service. However, if you are faced with a five-day berthing delay and additional time lost due to wind then this equates to an eight-day delay to a specific vessel, making it impossible to offer a weekly service," Rosser said.

A port stakeholder task team, created at the height of the lockdown, significantly eased the bottleneck with an inland depot 20km away in Belville. The initiative drew

praise from Western Cape finance MEC David Maynier, who commended Transnet Port Terminals for "bold steps".

Climate experts said stronger winds in summer were often associated with tropical storms further north. This year the country has had an active summer rainfall season in the north, which is typical in a La Niña year, referring to a global weather phenomenon. It has impacts across the world and has been linked to wetter conditions in Southern Africa.

A University of Cape Town analysis of wind readings at the city airport revealed a change in wind direction during summer, but not in speed.

"Previous work has shown that La Niña brings stronger southeasterlies in the Cape," said Juliet Hermes from the South African Environmental Observation Network.

Neville Sweijd, of the Alliance for Collaboration on Climate and Earth Systems Science, said the recent winds could also be related to storms experienced across much of the interior.

"I do know that there is an association with wind in Cape Town and rain in the north. When there are tropical storms in the north, we usually have strong wind down here," Sweijd said.

"How and why and what the connections are in terms of air circulations is for the climate scientists to answer. What I will add is that this is a La Niña – generally associated with increased rainfall in the summer rainfall area, and more and more intense storms than average, as we have seen in the north."

"Hence it is no surprise that the wind here has been stronger and more persistent than average. As to how much of an anomaly it is this season, I would also be keen to know."

"The wind dynamics in the harbour, especially when the southeaster blows, are quite unique and are affected by the topography [the mountains]."

So it will be very different at the airport and Cape Point, but there will be a relationship."

2m/s

Average metres-per-second increase in wind speed at Cape Town airport between 1956 and 2014

20°

Westerly shift in wind direction in the same period

Source: Wind variability over the southern coast of South Africa from 1956–2014

