

Joburg market's R32 million generator leaves fresh produce rotting

By Lindi Botha

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Thousands of tons of fresh produce worth an estimated R10 million is rotting on the Johannesburg Fresh Market floor as the premises has been without electricity since Saturday.



This, despite a generator that was unveiled amid much fanfare two weeks ago, but which stands idle.

Power cables were stolen in the early hours of Saturday morning, leaving the market without power. Cable theft has become so rampant that the market spent R32 million on a generator to ensure consistent power supply for the market and agents' cold rooms, which are crucial to keep the majority of produce fresh.

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While plans for the generator were announced three years ago, and unveiled a year after the deadline, the system quickly shut down due to an error in the design. A

market insider, who did not want to be named for fear of reprisals, said that “utter ineptitude” led to the design failure.

“The outlet for the generator fumes sends it straight back to the inlet for fresh air. How on earth could anyone have signed off on those plans, never mind built it and then unveiled it? Now a different contractor is charging millions to fix the error.”

Another market agent speculated that as the cables were stolen so quickly after being replaced, it was as if the same company that was replacing the cables stole them again generating income from the same set of cables over and over.

“The government and police are not able to deal with the large-scale cable theft that is happening. Its kilometres of cables that are stolen in broad daylight, every day,” said the agent.

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Trade at the market was, however, continuing as agents scrambled to get produce to consumers. Gjalt Hooghiemstra, president of the Institute of Market Agents of South Africa (IMASA), said that the market had not come to a standstill, since agents were still doing everything they could to mitigate the effects of the power outage and continue trading.

Another stakeholder, said that if it were not for the market agents, who step in to fill the gap in service delivery from the market management, the whole market would have collapsed long ago.

“Yet the farmers still have to pay a 5% commission to the market, but the infrastructure is dilapidated.”

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The market reportedly had a record sales month in October, with a R1 billion turnover.

“At the 5% service fee, it means the market made R50 million, yet not a single cold room is working,” said the market agent.

Currently only *potatoes and onions* are unaffected by the power outages, since they do not require cooling.

“It’s a disaster of note,” Hendrik Eksteen, CEO of Grow Fresh Produce Agents, told *Farmer’s Weekly*.

“There has been massive damage. Some produce has had to be thrown away, and much sold at discounted prices since the quality is lower.”

IMASA is in the process of engaging the market on how all the claims against the damage will be handled. Eksteen said that this was potentially the biggest claim the market would be facing in its history and no precedent existed as to how claims would be paid.