

Stellenbosch farmers bear the brunt of the storm

By Lindi Botha | 8 April 2024 | 3:08 pm

The Western Cape has been struck by disaster as strong winds sent fires blazing, roofs crashing in and wine cellars destroyed over the weekend.



Fire ravages historic Blaauwklippen manor house in Stellenbosch.

Photo: SA Wine via X (formerly Twitter)

While the origin of the fires in the Stellenbosch area are mostly unknown, they were fuelled by gale-force winds, which made them difficult to contain.

The wine grape harvest is still ongoing in the Western Cape and many wine farmers have now been left without functioning cellars.

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Severe damage to power lines has left large parts of the winelands area without electricity. Heidi Heins, director of De Clapmuts piggery and wine farm in the Klappmuts area, said she and her team were currently putting manual systems in

place to feed and ventilate the pigs and provide them with water. All of these tasks are mechanised, and without power can't function. The farm has been without power since Saturday.

"There is no indication of when the power will be back again, but considering the extent of the damage, it won't be soon. Oak trees were blown over and the whole area looks as if a tornado hit it. Our wine cellar has remained intact but our neighbour's cellar roof was blown off, taking all the wiring with it. It's going to take a long time for everyone to work through insurance claims and fix what has been damaged."

While Heins's wine grape harvest has at least been completed, the wind did remove the remaining leaves on the vines, which is not ideal. "But we are not in such a bad position considering other farmers who still need to ferment their grapes, but have no working cellars."

The Blaauwklippen Manor House, which was built on one of the oldest wine farms in Stellenbosch, was destroyed by a fire on Sunday.

According to Blaauwklippen, the fire broke out at a neighbouring farm on Sunday morning before spreading to Blaauwklippen Estate's historic buildings.

"The fire moved to Manor House from the dam's side, then to Jonkershuis and eventually to Cathedral. All three buildings burned to the ground," management said in a statement.

Despite the tragedy of the historic buildings being destroyed, management was grateful that no lives were lost.

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In addition to the businesses, more than 300 informal structures were razed to the ground when a fire ripped through the Kayamandi area on Saturday night, said the Stellenbosch Municipality.

Farmers have been warned about ongoing severe weather. Daniel Johnson, spokesperson for the Western Cape Department of Agriculture, said it was too soon

to measure the extent of the damage to farms in the province, especially since the tail end of the storm was expected to bring downpours.

The *South African Weather Service* has predicted rain for most of today, with wind speeds peaking at 19km/h. Sunny conditions are however expected tomorrow