News & analysis

Southern Africa , Horticulture , SPS / Food safety

EFSA report confirms current EC control measures for Citrus Black Spot

05 April 2014

In a report adopted at the end of January 2014 the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) reaffirmed that existing measures, if correctly applied, "are effective at protecting the EU from two serious diseases that attack citrus plants" (*Phyllosticta citricarpa*, the organism which causes Citrus Black Spot/CBS, and *Xanthomonas citri*, which causes citrus canker).

EFSA maintained that "both pathogens present a risk to the EU citrus industry because host plants are present in Europe and the environmental conditions are favourable." EFSA's plant health experts concluded that "there is a high risk that [*Phyllosticta citricarpa*] would enter the EU via import of citrus plants intended for planting and citrus fruit with leaves," as well as from citrus fruit without leaves, "because spores found on fruit are spread by rain and wind". However, it was found that seasonal variation affected the likelihood of infection, and the highest risk was towards the end of the southern hemisphere export season.

EFSA concluded that "more data and studies are needed on the epidemiology and impact of this pathogen" to enhance the robustness of the assessment. A footnote to the EFSA press release noted that the assessment assumed "a hypothetical unregulated market", i.e. that "all current EU citrus requirements" listed in EU regulations "are lifted without being replaced by any other risk reduction measures". Under these assumptions, the risk of trade in citrus leading to infections was rated in the EFSA Scientific Opinion as "moderately likely". However, there was considerable uncertainty with regard to this finding, given the "lack of knowledge of how *P. citricarpa* will respond under the EU climatic conditions".

EU farmers' organisation Copa-Cogeca has used the release of the EFSA report to "urge the Commission to take action immediately and suspend the import of citrus fruit from South Africa in 2014 and reinforce EU plant health controls".

While the temporary ban introduced in November 2013 was lifted in January 2014, the EFSA review means that South Africa is now back on a watch list for CBS. This is a cause of concern in South Africa, where the citrus industry has questioned "the technical justification of the current EU regulations", which are seen as disrupting trade.

South Africa's exports of around 650,000 tons of citrus to the EU occur from mid March until September. In 2013, additional costs estimated at between R500 million and R1 billion (between approx. €34 and €68 million) were incurred to ensure that South African exports complied with EU requirements. According to the Citrus Growers' Association of Southern Africa, (CGA), the "cost of preventative measures was eating into citrus growers' returns". However, while these costs are seen as immense, "the costs of failure are even more immense." Fortunately, current cost increases have come at a time of "record export prices and returns", given poor weather in other southern hemisphere citrus-producing countries.

While CGA is committed to continued dialogue on the issue in order to maintain the thriving citrus trade with the EU, exporters are also working to develop alternative markets in China, India and South Korea. SPS measures in China and tariffs in India and South Korea currently constrain exports. But these markets remain relatively small: even a major expansion of exports to South Korea to 1 million cartons would only represent 2.5% of the volumes taken by the EU market. In addition, the recent Australia–South Korea trade agreement will now grant Australia tariff preferences on the South Korean market that South African exporters do not enjoy.

Sources

EFSA, 'Measures to prevent entry of citrus pests "are appropriate"', 21 February 2014
http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/press/news/140221.htm
EFSA, 'Scientific Opinion on the risk of *Phyllosticta citricarpa* (*Guignardia citricarpa*) for the EU territory with identification and evaluation of risk reduction options', *EFSA Journal* 2014;12:3557, undated
http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/doc/3557.pdf
BusinessDayLive, 'SA back on European Union's citrus black-spot list', 24 February 2014
http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/agriculture/2014/02/24/sa-back-on-europ...
Copa-Cogeca, 'In wake of new EFSA report, Copa-Cogeca calls on EU Commission to take urgent measures to stop imports of citrus fruit contaminated with black spot coming from South Africa in 2014 and to increase monitoring of South American imports', 26 February 2014
http://www.copa-cogeca.be/Main.aspx?page=Archive
Business Report, 'SA farmers cough up to keep black spot out of EU', 25 February 2014
http://www.iol.co.za/business/news/sa-farmers-cough-up-to-keep-black-spo...
Freshfruitportal.com, 'EU tightening could pose "huge danger" for global citrus industry', 11 February 2014
http://www.freshfruitportal.com/2014/02/11/eu-tightening-could-pose-huge...
Freshfruitportal.com, 'Korean FTA brings tariff break for Australian cherries, citrus and nuts', 18 February 2014
http://www.freshfruitportal.com/2014/02/18/korean-fta-brings-tariff-brea...

Editorial comment

Given that the EFSA report has endorsed existing control measures, it remains to be seen whether the EC will respond to EU farmers' demands and move beyond the surveillance and five-consignment trigger threshold established in 2013. In 2013, after eight CBS-contaminated consignments were intercepted, the South African authorities initiated export controls. It was only after some 38 consignments were intercepted that a temporary import ban was introduced in November 2013, at the end of the South African export season (see *Agritrade* articles ' **Targeted restrictions placed on South African citrus exports**', 16 November 2013, and ' **Debate on Citrus Black Spot continues**', 13 January 2014).

If similar collaboration were maintained in 2014, then the application of current EU control measures would be likely to have only a limited impact on South African citrus exports, making it easier to accommodate any trade effects through the expansion of exports to alternative markets. This would be particularly the case if the South African government fast-tracked negotiations to address SPS issues in trade to non-traditional markets and trade negotiations to secure tariff concessions to major Asian markets.

Related content

EU tightens controls on citrus imports from South Africa
Pressure on EC to act pre-emptively on South African citrus exports as new season approaches
SA avocado experience highlights growing importance of addressing SPS issues for market diversification
EFSA report confirms current EC control measures for Citrus Black Spot
Debate on Citrus Black Spot continues

http://agritrade.cta.int/