



Increased interceptions of 'harmful organisms' overhang some ACP horticultural exports to the EU

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In mid July 2014, the EC sent a warning letter to the national plant protection organisations (NPPOs) in eight countries, warning that "strict action against the import of fruit and other products from specific countries" would be taken "if they fail to improve compliance with phytosanitary regulations" by 30 September 2014. Four of the countries notified were ACP countries – "Ghana (pumpkins and aubergines), Dominican Republic (squashes, eggplant and mango), Kenya (pumpkin, mango and basil)... and Uganda (paprika)".

The EC "invited each NPPO to investigate the reasons for [their non-compliance] with the EU legislation and to take adequate corrective actions" to reduce the number of intercepted consignments containing "harmful organisms". If no appropriate remedial actions were notified and taken, the EC reserved the right to take "emergency measures" to restrict imports of the most problematical commodities.

On 31 July, the website *Fresh Plaza* reported the imposition by the EU of "a temporary ban on Ghanaian vegetable imports after consignments were identified as not meeting quality standards". This followed notification via EUROPHYT, the EU Notification System for Plant Health Interceptions, of 35 detections of harmful organisms in consignments imported from Ghana June.

The temporary ban forms part of a wider pattern of SPS-related restrictions on imports from Ghana – mango imports were banned in January 2014 due to fruit fly infestations, and a temporary ban was imposed on Ghanaian citrus imports in May 2014 following an outbreak of angular leaf spot.

The ban on vegetable and fruit imports from Ghana comes at a time when exports had been growing at 10% per annum and "great opportunities for growth" were seen, based both on exports and domestic market expansion. There is particular interest in cooperation between Ghanaian exporters and Dutch importers.

The Ghanaian government has sought to stress the routine nature of these periodic quality-related problems, emphasising that measures are being put in place at governmental level to address the problems, but has also observed that primary responsibility lies with the producing and exporting enterprises.

Sources

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Editorial comment

It would appear important for ACP governments seeking to promote horticultural exports to the EU to establish and effectively police the minimum standards required for export to the EU. It needs to be borne in mind that non-compliance by individual operators can carry implications for the whole export sector concerned, by influencing the frequency of inspections and the charges levied for SPS-related inspections.

This is particularly important when exports are taking place to markets where the importing country is moving to recover the full cost of the official import controls. Here, failure to secure reduced fee status, particularly if combined with an increased frequency of inspections, can carry serious commercial implications for the whole of the affected sector, and not only for the enterprises that are the principal source of non-compliant exports. (For details on the structure of charges levied, see *Agritrade* special report 'Financing EU food and feed controls: Recent developments and implications for the ACP', forthcoming 2014).

An additional factor to bear in mind is the impact on EUROPHYT notifications of the strengthening of official import controls in individual member states. Since the UK introduced moves to strengthen official SPS controls on imports from 2009, it has come to account for 20.3% of total interceptions reported to the EUROPHYT system, up from 6.5% in 2009 (see *Agritrade* article 'EU annual report on plant health interceptions from third country suppliers', forthcoming 2014).

In this context, higher levels of interceptions of "harmful organisms" may be reported for ACP countries whose primary EU export market is the UK than for other destination markets, simply because of the stricter controls being applied in the UK, rather than because of an increased incidence of infestations in consignments from particular exporting countries.

This is an issue that the affected ACP countries' governments and exporters' associations may wish to explore, in order to ensure the proper application of the EU's risk-based SPS inspection framework.

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