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No bar to SA's citrus trade with EU, says Davies

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Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies believes SA has reached understanding with EU on fruit exports

TRADE and Industry Minister Rob Davies believes South Africa has reached an understanding with the European Union (EU) over the threat of black-spotted citrus to the country's fruit exports.

Mr Davies said in Parliament this week the understanding had been reached during bilateral meetings between government officials and European trade commissioner Karel De Gucht at last month's South Africa-EU summit. Citrus black spot is a disease that affects the rind of citrus fruit but not the fruit itself and carries no risk to consumers.

The local industry was under the impression it was threatened with exclusion from the lucrative European market which takes about 45% of South Africa's citrus exports and represents the largest market for this product. The prevailing industry view was the EU had been seeking to protect Spanish citrus production.

"They (the EU) said that they were satisfied with the way in which the team in South Africa was identifying particular locations and farms where black spot existed and cutting them out of the export market. They said ... they were not threatening to cut our exports and were open to a scientific discussion about whether black spot ... could actually infect their own orchards," Mr Davies said.

South Africa does not believe there is a risk of infection from the fruit but has so far been unable to persuade the European authorities of this view.

"Originally the way it was presented was that there would be five interceptions after which consequences would follow. We understood that that could include the prohibition of South African exports."

But there had been no interruption to trade, because the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries had proactively identified farms where outbreaks occurred.

"I think we need to reach an understanding of the implications and the impacts of these kind of measures and to find a mechanism whereby we can have a constructive engagement earlier on. Changes to their phytosanitary regimes can have a disruptive affect. There could ... be a fairly adverse consequence as there are 40,000 permanent jobs and 40,000 seasonal jobs ... at stake."

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