

SA citrus exports to EU increase

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Johannesburg - South Africa's citrus exports to the European Union (EU) increased by 9% in value last year despite having been hit by the troublesome citrus black spot fungus (CBS), said EU ambassador to South Africa Roeland van de Geer.



EU and South African scientists are still arguing over whether or not CBS could infect European citrus plants, he told journalists. But in the meantime, the exports from South Africa continue, though under strict controls to prevent fruit with the black spot on its skin, entering the EU market.

EU officials said South African citrus growers had themselves decided to stop citrus exports to EU near the end of last year's season, because too many CBS-infected fruits bound for export were being discovered.

So the volume of exports had dropped slightly but the monetary valued had increased by about 9 percent because of higher prices in Europe.

After the citrus industry had stopped exporting from CBS affected areas, it improved its system for weeding out CBS-infected fruit. A team from the EU's Food and Veterinary Office had recently visited South Africa and concluded that South Africa's measures complied with EU legislation.

So exports had already begun again at the start of the 2015 season and they would continue unless there was a surge in the number of CBS-infected citrus fruits intercepted.

Van de Geer said the outcome of the joint South Africa and EU scientific investigation of whether CBS could infect EU citrus plants should hold no risks for South Africa.

If the scientists found there was a risk of infection, exports should continue under the existing control measures. And if they found there was no risk of infection, the measures could be lifted.

More than 34% of South Africa's citrus is exported to the EU and 40% of all citrus consumed in the EU in winter was imported from South Africa.

Van de Geer strongly dismissed some suggestions from the South African side that the restrictions on CBS-infected citrus were a disguised trade protection measure. He noted, for comparison, that the recent eruption of Xylella Fastidiosa disease into southern Italy via plant material imported from Central America had forced farmers to destroy thousands of olive trees.

Van de Geer said that relations between the EU and South Africa were generally good and the annual EU-South Africa summit would take place later this year in Brussels.

It had been cancelled last year because both sides were preoccupied with elections.

Last year had been seen by some as a bad one in relations – because of disagreements over South Africa's unilateral cancellation of investment protection treaties with individual EU member states, the CBS dispute and President Jacob Zuma's last-minute withdrawal from the EU-Africa summit in Brussels because Belgium would not give a visa to Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's wife Grace who is under a EU travel ban.

But Van de Geer insisted that the public perception was wrong and that much had been achieved last year, mainly the signing of an EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with South Africa and several Southern African Development Community (Sadc) states after protracted negotiations.

There had also been a very successful South Africa Week in Brussels, citrus sales to the EU had increased in value despite the dispute over CBS and development cooperation had continued, with a new seven-year programme of 250 million euros.

South African exports to the EU in 2014 had increased to R193 billion from R165 billion in 2013. EU exports to South Africa had increased from R284 billion to R301 billion.

And fully 50% of South Africa's exports to the EU were of value-added goods, rather than raw materials.

Van de Geer said he expected the EPA deal – which gives both South Africa and the EU greater access to each other's markets – would begin to be implemented later this year.

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