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INDUSTRY

EU farmers demand stricter disease checks on SA citrus

Rudy Ruitenberg, Bloomberg



European Union farm lobby Copa- Cogeca called on the 28-nation bloc to tighten controls on citrus imports from South Africa to prevent the introduction of the plant disease black spot. The EU should widen proposed control measures to include all South African citrus, including fruit for processing, Copa- Cogeca Secretary General Pekka Pesonen wrote in a letter to EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg. Imports from zones with black spot disease should be automatically banned the moment six contaminated cargoes are intercepted, Pesonen said.

South Africa is the biggest supplier of citrus fruit to the EU from outside the bloc, shipping 471.5 million euros (\$651.3 million) of oranges, grapefruits, mandarins and lemons last year, Eurostat data show. The EU intercepted 34 shipments from the country last year that contained black spot disease, the Europhyt database shows.

"The high number of interceptions in 2013 demonstrates that South Africa's competent authorities are incapable of carrying out effective phytosanitary controls," Pekonen wrote. "Copa-Cogeca is therefore highly concerned that the proposed control system will once again fail to function properly."

A March proposal by the EU to inspect fruit for the fresh produce market at packaging stations provides a derogation for fruit that's earmarked for processing, which accounts for 10% of imports, according to Copa-Cogeca.

Copa-Cogeca "regrets" the checks don't apply for processing fruit, and said the ban on imports upon detection of a sixth contaminated batch should apply to both imports for processing as well as the fresh produce market, Pekonen wrote.

Mandarins, Lemons

The EU imported 433,074 metric tons of oranges from South Africa last year, with a value of 286 million euros, as well as 104,429 tons of grapefruit, 80,934 tons of mandarins and 25,112 tons of lemons, Eurostat data show.

Spain, the EU's largest citrus grower, produced 3.68 million tons of oranges last year, as well as 2.02 million tons of mandarins, 767,200 tons of lemons and 62,700 tons of grapefruit, the country's agriculture ministry estimates.

Black spot spreading into the EU through trade is considered "moderately likely," increasing to "likely" for imported fruit with leaves, the European Food Safety Authority wrote in a February report.

EU citrus growers in November demanded the bloc take immediate "drastic measures" to ward off black spot, such as a ban on imports of citrus fruit from South Africa, according to Spanish young farmers' association Asaja.

Trade Measures

South African citrus growers last year halted most exports to the EU, their biggest market, as of Sept. 18 in a bid to head off trade measures.

A call to Justin Chadwick, chief executive officer of the Citrus Growers Association of South Africa, wasn't immediately answered. The association said in February it was preparing to supply citrus fruit in total compliance with EU plant health regulations.

Black spot disease is caused by the fungus guignardia citricarpa Kiely and results in leaf spotting and fruit blemishes, with lemons particularly susceptible, according to EFSA. The regulator has said there are no reports of eradication once the fungus is established in an area.



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