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Friday, 17 June 2016

NEWS

## Davies to fight citrus ban

Sapa



Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies on Monday vowed to fight tooth and nail to avert a possible European ban on citrus imports from South Africa.

This came after oranges contaminated with black spot fungus were found in a shipment to the Netherlands.

"If decisions are taken that keep us out of an important market and have implications for jobs, we will not hesitate to use whatever tools are available in our tool box to defend our interests in this regard," Davies told a media briefing in Cape Town.

He said he suspected Europe's stance was motivated more by protectionist tendencies than true concerns over the fungus spreading to continental orchards. The fungus is harmless to humans "even if you eat the peel", said Davies.

"The question arises -- is this a measure to protect plant health in Europe or is this a measure to protect the interests of certain parts of the European industry against competition, and is part of the competition coming from the largest exporter of citrus fruit into Europe?"

He said Europe's reluctance to compromise on the issue of citrus black spot could prove devastating for the R8 billion local citrus industry, but this argument was finding little sympathy on the other side.

"The fact that there are 60 000 to 80 000 jobs at stake in South Africa, I find this to be the least compelling argument for my interlocutors in Europe.

"They don't really care about that, it's other issues. We care greatly about that and we will fight this thing."

Davies was speaking at a briefing called to announce the initialling of an economic partnership agreement between a sub-group of Southern African Development Community members and the European Union after more than 10 years of stop-start negotiations.

On citrus, deputy director-general for international trade Xavier Carim said the off-season period for which South African growers had duty-free access to the European market had been extended by six weeks.

He termed this a "not insignificant" concession but added that increasingly foreign agricultural produce was kept out of Europe by stricter phyto-sanitary standards.

Davies said: "We will fight it because I'm going to have to be personally convinced, somebody is going to have to sit me down and personally convince me, that this is not driven by protectionist desires, and that this is all about plant health.

"I think there is a very strong presumption the other way."

Dutch authorities for plant health issued a notification of phyto-sanitary non-compliance on Sunday after intercepting the consignment of local oranges carrying the virus.

The notification means that citrus imports from South Africa are placed on a trade watch list at EU borders.

If spotty fruit is found, the consignments are impounded.

In November last year, the EU stopped importing citrus from South Africa over concerns that citrus black spot could infect local crops.

But in May South Africa's largest trading partner ruled that it would not implement a ban but follow stricter requirements for South African citrus being exported to Europe, which forced local growers to use more chemical fungicides.

The threat of a ban still hovered, Davies explained, because Europe had decided that if more than a certain amount of contaminated imports were found they would lock out all South African citrus.

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Last year, South Africa was the world's largest exporter of oranges, and about 70 percent of the citrus fruit sold in Eope came from South Africa.



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