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INDUSTRY

SA citrus growers skirt Spain due to disease test dispute

Bloomberg



South Africa, the world's biggest orange exporter after Spain and Egypt, will avoid citrus shipments through Spanish ports to avert a possible ban after authorities there refused producers permission to inspect testing facilities for black-spot disease.



The fungus, which affects some South African produce, causes blemishes on the peel of the fruit, which accounts for about 40 percent of citrus imported by the EU. The nation's Citrus Growers Association is disputing findings by the European Food Safety Authority that the disease can survive transport and storage and could establish in EU regions.

South Africa had to halt exports to the region last year after EU authorities intercepted 16 shipments with black-spot- affected fruits.

The association sent an expert to Spain to inspect the testing methodology after the interceptions, and he was refused access, CGA Chief Executive Officer Justin Chadwick said by phone March 26.

"He was allowed to look at all the Netherlands's facilities and all the things in Germany," Chadwick said. "That was an immediate red flag regarding the risk of sending any of the fruit to those ports," he said, referring to Spain.

The Spanish Agriculture Ministry didn't respond to an e- mail or call seeking comment. The EU in March 2013 said it would consider measures against citrus from South Africa if more than five cargoes with black spot were found in the same export season.

The EU's concerns over black-spot transfers are misplaced, South African Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies told reporters in Johannesburg Thursday.

'Commercial Interest'

"Science does not unambiguously support the view that these black spots can be transmitted," he said. "There are other drivers of this and they are linked to commercial interest."

The nation's citrus and related industries employ about 60,000 people, Davies said.

The first shipments of citrus from South Africa this season are heading for the EU now, Chadwick said. Volumes will rise from May, he said. South Africa exported 115 million 15-kilogram (33-pound) cartons of citrus worldwide last year even though it halted EU sales in September to avoid a possible ban by the 28- nation bloc over the black-spot fungus, Chadwick said.

The country will probably ship less citrus in 2015 than last year because of the decline of the ruble in Russia, which accounted for 12 percent of 2014 volumes, Chadwick said. Russia has this season ordered 50 percent less than what it typically does from Morocco, he said.

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