The Phytosanitary Game

Signatories to the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC), and its associated Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement had lofty ideals preventing global spread of pests and diseases, while at the same time ensuring that such precautions did not form a technical barrier to trade. There can be no disputing countries’ rights to protect its fauna and flora from such risks, but just when does this whole thing become a sham? Is it when an application for Clementine for access to Japan has been “in process” for 12 years? - despite there being no risks associated with Clementines at all - the Japanese already import about 5 million cartons of other citrus from South Africa. Or is it when an application for Barlinka grapes for access to Japan is still awaiting approval after some 20 years - TWENTY YEARS. Some people can grow very old in that time. And why should the time-temperate treatment for Med fruit fly on grapefruit shipped from Israel be any different from that for grapefruit shipped from South Africa. Whatever passport a Med Fruit Fly is carrying - the treatment as described in the USDA Treatment Manual is effective. If South Africa wants to move to the Israel treatment (a longer treatment at a higher temperature), then we have to do the experimental work, and pay for Japanese researchers to come to South Africa, and then wait while the Japanese Ministry consider the application thereafter. And based on the Clementine and Barlinka experiences that wait may be lengthy. It is not difficult to see why many countries are becoming disillusioned with this whole process.

Another fine example of how silly this whole game is, is when considering the recognition as a pest free area, or low prevalence area, or pest free place of production. All these terms are well defined and standards have been set. However, you may be recognised by the USA as a pest free place of production, but if you now want to be recognised by the EU you have to apply, submit the details, be subject to inspections, and await a number of meetings to decide if this status can be accepted. What a joke - the lofty ideals of freeing up trade has actually established a system that allows countries to delay or prevent trade for decades.

And it is not a zero sum game - almost everybody loses. Exporting growers lose as they cannot trade their product, consumers lose as they cannot get the product, or it is overpriced as supply is limited, transporters lose as less produce is shipped, port facility owners lose as their facilities are underutilised - and so on. Who wins - domestic growers or those with access may win as competition is limited, and scientists and other government employees win as their sheltered employment is prolonged through their own inability or disinterest in concluding an agreement. It is time that all of us LOSERS stood up and said enough is enough. If a treatment kills Med fly (Israeli, South African or Spanish), then it kills all Med fly - and all countries should just accept that. Likewise if an area is deemed free of a pest by another country - then that should be its status. And these conditions should prevail until proved otherwise.

I would say that the biggest risk facing South African fruit growers is not hail, or frost, or drought, or oil prices, or exchange rates. It is the risk that some ill equipped official at a border post prods a dead larva, decides it “appears to be alive”, and immediately halts all imports putting in place a process that disrupts trade, changes agreed and tried and tested treatments increasing shipping costs and causes additional cold damage to fruit. One such incident cost South African citrus growers over twenty million rand in direct costs in 2005 - the indirect consequences are much larger as other trading partners initiate similar changes.

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