A fresh wave of “negotiation” between foreign buyers and SA citrus exporters around food safety requirements, particularly which Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs) are applicable for export citrus, has highlighted the need to remind supply chain participants of the resources available to them during these discussions.

The obvious concern with a negotiation is that if sellers are repeatedly drawn into a debate about which MRL standards apply, a situation is perpetuated whereby Food Safety continues to be used as a competitive instrument. The issue is not that entities should be prevented from competing in the marketplace but rather that the full implications of new requirements are understood and that they pose no risk to the sustainability of the SA citrus export industry.

The implications of competitive food safety strategies have been discussed in previous articles in this Journal but the key ones can be summarized as follows:

- Ultimately undermining consumer confidence in what is considered “safe” food.
- Buyer requirements may not always factor in obligatory requirements to CONTROL, as opposed to manage, certain pests and disease of phytosanitary significance. This is particularly important as non-tariff barriers replace tariffs as a means of regulating/restricting trade.
- With a decreasing number of available plant protection products (PPPs) further restriction on permissible PPPs is a sedative to Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies.
- There is a clear digression from science-based mythology used in Food Safety strategy. This makes decisions difficult to defend.
- There is a clear digression from the legal framework used in Food Safety strategy. While buyers certainly have the right to set commercial requirements that are different from the legal parameters, pursuing alternative points of reference leaves the legal parameters obsolete. And without a legal framework, a heavy burden of responsibility falls on supply chain participants to ensure safety. Can this burden be carried by the private sector?
- Potential development of resistance to key PPPs.

Broadening the engagement with buyers to consider these implications is the goal of the CGA MRL Help Desk, co-ordinated by Paul Hardman at CGA. Presently growers and export agents make use of this Help Desk (at least on a weekly basis). Typical actions include coordinating a response to a buyer on behalf of many suppliers to that buyer; engaging with CRI and experts to provide scientific evidence to support a particular recommendation; informing buyers of the Recommended Usage Restrictions document published by CGA/CRI; providing a point of contact to engage with buyers on behalf of growers and agents; instilling confidence in the SA citrus industry’s ability to provide safe food. As part of the ongoing activities of this Help Desk Prof Vaughan Hattingh and Paul Hardman will be visiting the UK, Belgium and Germany later in the year to engage with buyers around food safety matters.

Citrus growers and exporters are particularly encouraged to make use of this service offered by CGA.

Citrus area overlooking Chicamba Dam.