

European Union import restrictions concerning citrus black spot disease (CBS) and South African exports have been partially relaxed with revised rules coming into force from June 1.

One of the most significant relaxations concerns the CBS interception threshold of five which was a limit aimed at stronger controls and was often referred to as the 'five strike rule'.

The other easing is for citrus used in juicing. It must still come from CBS-treated areas, but from June will only be subject to a visual inspection.

If CBS is detected then only that particular consignment will be refused, without knock-on effects for the South African packing facilities from which it originated.

Both relaxations come after a European Food Safety Authority risk assessment that determined there is a low risk of transferring CBS to processing juice.

Reacting to the EU's partial easing, South Africa's Citrus Growers' Association's special envoy for market access and EU matters, Deon Joubert, tells www.freshfruitportal.com it's a step in the right direction.

"They've scrapped the five strike rule which means that it's not automatic and the other was to slightly change the juicing regulation. It wasn't a massive change but a distinct change to the juicing regulations that implies that fruit for juicing has got a slightly easier path in," he says.

"It's not fantastic and not what everyone wanted ideally but it is a step in the right direction so from that perspective, it's welcome."

"It's not going to change the game plan at all. We need to be as serious and dedicated as we have shown in the past and are still showing, so from that perspective the South African position will be the same."

The CGA and other organizations have worked hard in recent years, alongside European authorities, to reduce interceptions at the border. CBS remains an area of concern for the Mediterranean citrus industries such as in Spain and Italy.

On the EU side, the Commission has maintained its strong position on CBS, not just from South Africa but also from countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay which also have CBS interception issues.

Also in March, the head of European farming group Copa Cogeca, Pekka Pesonen, called for tighter rules to protect Europe from the threat of the disease, citing South Africa and the South American countries as risks.

But on the South African side interceptions have dropped from 35 cases in 2013, to 25 in 2014 and 15 in 2015. Meanwhile Pesonen pointed toward 70 cases detected this year from Uruguay, 17 from Argentina and 13 from Brazil, which he branded 'unacceptable.'

Last month the CGA decided to withdraw organic lemons from the European market for the greater good and mitigate risk. This will remain the case for the rest of the season.

"The regulation on the five strike rule has been repelled, repositioned or reassessed, and I think the fact that they've done this is indeed some recognition for the work we've done."

The South African industry has long disputed the EU's CBG controls but nevertheless works strenuously towards easier access.

“The most important part for us is the fact that we need to carry on with our hard work and do things that we don’t deem to be a risk to Europe.

“But as long as the Europeans measure the way they do, we need to be vigilant and comply with what is required so that’s what will continue to do.

“Hopefully we can show this year that we’ve pulled organic lemons from the market because from last year’s 15 interceptions, four of those were organic lemons. We feel we needed to do a little bit more work on that before we resume exporting.”

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