

Spain: Citrus sector asks for tariffs on South African oranges to stay

On the eve of the EU Parliament and Council's decision regarding the Economic Partnership Agreement between the EU and the Southern African Development Community, the organisations representing the Spanish citrus sector have approached the European Parliament and the Government of Spain to ask for the tariffs on oranges imported from South Africa not to be lifted.

They believe that this move (about which they had not been forewarned and which has not followed the due impact study) would be "a very tough blow for the sector." This is a sector that is extremely sensitive to any excess supply, especially at the beginning of the campaign, and which has faced serious difficulties in ensuring the profitability of producers in recent years. Furthermore, they have warned of the situation on the Community market, which is very saturated and has already received more than 400,000 tonnes of South African oranges in 2015 and was further affected by the impact of the Russian veto on EU imports.

The organisations have also complained about the lack of reciprocity and the imbalance between the negotiations of the European administration, which were intended to open the doors of the EU - "which are extremely fast, efficient and clear" - and the EU's offensive trade policy, which is unable to eliminate tariffs and prevent non-tariff barriers and which is based on slow and very expensive "export protocols" that limit the competitiveness of operators who are willing to ship to third country markets.

On 10 June, the European Commission signed an Economic Partnership Agreement with the Southern African Development Community, which involves, in the case of oranges, an extension (up to November) of the period in which South Africa can export oranges to the EU without tariffs. This decision must now be ratified by the countries of the Southern African Development Community and, in parallel, by the EU Council and the European Parliament. Depending on how long the ratification process takes, the gradual removal of tariffs could start as early as 2016. This would thus open the door to larger volumes of oranges from South Africa (the world's second largest exporter of citrus, behind Spain) into the EU market, precisely at the period of maximum activity of Spanish oranges. The Mediterranean production would consequently suffer from the consequences of trade and political relations between the EU and third countries.

The organisations are not against the spirit of these concessions from the EU institutions to the states of South Africa, which aim to help boost the economic growth of the region through its support for the agricultural sector; however, they have claimed their legitimate right to count on "EU support for economic growth." In the letter sent today, they have also criticised the lack of transparency and the absence of an impact study and compensatory measures for the damage that the agreement would cause. They finally expressed their categorical opposition to the agreement, pending ratification, and have requested the Government of Spain and the European Parliament to vote against its approval.

This blow to the Spanish citrus sector would follow shortly after the Commission's decision to become more flexible with the phytosanitary controls on citrus from South Africa (with its Implementing Decision 2016/715), which has again been tailored to the commercial interests of that country and of the importers in Member States of the EU which are not producers, thereby ignoring the warnings of the EFSA, which continues to call attention to the risk posed by citrus imports from South Africa, given its problems in tackling "black spot", which could jeopardise the health of 600,000 hectares of citrus plantations in Europe.

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