

Spain slams RSA for dodging citrus controls

Citrus Management Committee claims exporters are avoiding Spanish ports in favour of UK and Dutch ports

Spanish citrus producers have accused South Africa of dodging phytosanitary controls on exports to the European Union by bypassing Spanish ports in favour of entry points in other European countries where less stringent inspections are carried out.

According to the Citrus Management Committee (CGC), just 120 out of the 1.1m tonnes of citrus South Africa shipped to the EU between January 2015 and August 2016 came through Spanish ports. A decade ago the figure was 109,600 tonnes and Spain was the third biggest entry point in Europe.

"Following Brussels' decision at the end of 2013 to impose a "symbolic" veto when South Africa's season had all but finished, shipments through Spanish ports dropped to virtually nothing," the committee said in a statement.

It accuses the Citrus Growers Association of Southern Africa of firstly refusing to acknowledge that its black spot problem posed a threat to Spanish production, then questioning Spanish inspection methods and finally, avoiding controls altogether by using other ports, even though this significantly raises the cost of transportation as much of the citrus is destined for packhouses in Valencia, Murcia and Andalucía.

CGC said the problem has been compounded by the EU's subsequent decision to relax controls on citrus destined for juicing, which has fuelled the tendency seen over the past decade for South Africa to send a growing percentage of its exports to the UK and the Netherlands where controls are more lax.

"Instead of focusing its efforts on improving monitoring and control systems in the field, South Africa has decided to avoid inspections at Spanish ports," the committee said. "Between them, the UK and Netherlands now account for 74 per cent of EU imports from South Africa compared with 64 per cent in 2006."

CGC said South Africa was also finding alternative routes into Europe to bypass controls, such as Portugal, which has seen a 24-fold increase in imports during the past decade (59,000 tonnes in 2015 compared with 2,445 tonnes in 2005).

It added that while South Africa is not the only country to pose a phytosanitary threat to European citrus production, it regularly comes first or second in the list of countries with the highest number of rejections, "which is not the case with Argentina, Uruguay or Brazil, which export a much lower volume than South Africa but nevertheless send a high proportion of this through Spain".

