

South Africa lifts EU citrus exports despite lower volumes, tough CBS rules

South Africa has recorded growth of 2.3 million cartons in its exports to Europe this year, in a season when total exports were actually down by 9.1 million cartons and the industry continued to contend with strict EU rules against citrus black spot (CBS).

This is the message from Citrus Growers Association of Southern Africa (CGA) special envoy for market access and EU matters, Deon Joubert, who highlighted 45.7 million cartons were shipped to the old continent, representing 41.8% of total shipments worldwide.

“This to the market with a potential doomsday scenario of closure facing us in 2012/13 due to CBS,” Joubert emphasized in a briefing.

“This year’s CBS interception count of 4 must have seemed like a different world compared to the past 3 years of 2013 [35], 2014 [27] and 2015 [15].

“SA has thus shown remarkable ability to change the game and demonstrated its huge capacity in mitigating the CBS risk to EU lawmakers.”

He said this resulted in what was a potential “market access stopped” a few years ago becoming a relative “non-issue”.

“This SA achievement came over the same period when fellow citrus exporting 3rd countries to the EU experienced rising CBS interceptions,” he said.

“Consider SA’s current “compliance” approach on CBS and EU market access. Based on the secure CBS scientific knowledge [honed over years by the CRI’s (Citrus Research International) impressive research capacity] that CBS does not pose a threat to the citrus growing regions of the EU, SA has now run the race and deflated the political and statutory processes instituted to disrupt or undermine its export here.

“With the compliance approach, the EU could have forgotten that SA in fact is in scientific disagreement with the EFSA PRA (European Food Safety Authority’s Pest Risk Assessment) that CBS can pose any threat to EU citrus orchards.”

So even though CBS has become a relative non-issue, as Joubert described it, he did highlight the excessive cost in keeping it that way, claiming the sector could not keep spending in excess of one billion rand (€68 million) if the science showed the disease posed no threat to European citrus orchards.

“As an example reading the above one would have expected an easing of tensions and better trading conditions in Europe or at least a pat on the back,” he said.

“Not so – the Commission frowned on the 4 CBS interceptions during our meeting in September 2016 and indicated to know how SA is going to improve to lower the count of 4 interceptions.”

He said the only avenue left for the industry after setting the CBS interceptions level in Europe at a virtually “non-existent” level was to push for a conclusion on the issue from a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel.

“A WTO panel should close that chapter and even in the unlikely event of the WTO process being unsuccessful, SA would only have a continuance of the current status quo of CBS controls and measures, so nothing to lose,” he said.

Calls for stricter measures from EU industry

Meanwhile, European industry group Copa Cogeca has sent a letter to European Members of Parliament (MEPs) urging them to approve a motion for a resolution that states EU measures to prevent the introduction of black spot in citrus fruit in the EU are insufficient.

The motion for a resolution has been approved by the European Parliament’s Agriculture Committee, calling for more stringent rules to be put in place.

“It is crucial to have proper rules in force to avoid a repetition of a Xylella-like drama, this time in areas producing citrus fruit in the south of the EU,” said MEP Clara Eugenia Aguilera García, who is leading the initiative.

“If there is any lesson to be learnt from [olive disease] Xylella, it is that we cannot ‘wait and see’ nor can we stand idly by while the European Commission is trying to relax controls of imported processed fruits aimed at avoiding spread of diseases such as citrus black spot and citrus canker.”

Copa and Cogeca Secretary-General Pekka Pesonen said he welcomed the resolution, which he claimed was backed up by scientific evidence from the EFSA.

“It is totally unacceptable that the EU Commission should attempt to weaken border controls on citrus fruit imports coming into the EU and destined for processing as they do not take on board EFSA’s recommendations on the risks to the EU’s citrus groves into account,” Pesonen said.

“The EU and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organization recommend cold treatment to combat this harmful organism by ensuring that the citrus fruit comes in a container at a low temperature.

“Unless the EU Commission puts in place tough measures to prevent the spread of the disease, there is a serious risk that it will enter the EU,” he said.

He added the EU citrus sector was important both economically and socially.

“Without stronger action, 600, 000 ha and 5000, 000 tonnes of produce are put at risk. The EU is also a net exporter of citrus fruit and introduction of the disease in the EU would cause us to lose exports and jeopardise our exporting position,” he concluded.

www.freshfruitportal.com