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South Africa turns to WTO on CBS

The citrus black spot stand-off between South Africa and the EU is finally being taken to the World Trade Organization

South Africa has finally launched its bid at the WTO (World Trade Organization) to find a resolution for its longstanding battle with the European Union over the issue of citrus black spot (CBS).

This was revealed by the deputy director-general of the country's Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), Mooketsa Ramasodi, during the recent annual citrus grower conference in South Africa.

The announcement surprised many industry leaders because, up until, now the South Africans have been playing their cards close to their chests. They have also been quietly diplomatic with EU countries in order to resolve the issue.

"The matter of South Africa's WTO bid is now out in the open," say industry sources, who noted that there are now two initiatives – one being the more aggressive move via the WTO and the other the continued efforts of direct contact with Spanish and other producers on the matter.

At issue is the EU's stance on whether there is scientific evidence that CBS can indeed be transferred on citrus from South African orchards to those in Mediterranean citrus-producing countries.

In terms of the present EU view, the South African industry has to conform to harsh mitigation measures which, according to some sources, make conducting business within the EU unsustainable.

It is not clear whether South Africa has already submitted its complaint and documentation to the WTO. Once this is done, the EU will have 60 days to submit its own scientific data which is being challenged by South Africa. Up to now the EU has declined to share the data on which it bases its decisions with the South Africans. The South Africans have also consistently claimed that its own data is supported by statistics from other citrus producing countries.

The WTO move is therefore an effort to force the EU to make its data available so the matter can be resolved once and for all.

It was revealed at the South African citrus summit that the country has a much better record than, for instance, competing countries Brazil and Argentina regarding CBS.

These countries are not subjected to the same measures the South Africans have to contend with. One citrus industry source said that South Africa has for at least five years been compelled to spend around R1.87bn per year on mitigation measures.

"If the finding at the WTO is against the EU and in favour of South Africa, there may well be justification for a great deal of compensation," the source outlined.

Other sources say it is clear that the matter has nothing to do with CBS. "It is clear that some European producers want to keep South Africa out of the European and British markets at the beginning of their season when their early season varieties cannot compete with South African mandarins."

South African citrus growers were told at the conference that the EU is under siege – from outside and from within.

"Brussels has become a soft target and an easy scapegoat. It is trying to fight back with European consolidation, trailblazing legislation on big issues, unity on Brexit and free trade agreements. A tough stance on plant health is part of this."

The South African envoys will soon be back in Europe to meet with grower groups to seek solutions to the problem.