

EU to consider activating South African citrus safeguard clause amid Spanish crisis

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The European Commission's Director of Trade Defense, Leopoldo Rubinacci, has reportedly said that Brussels will study the possible activation of the safeguard clause in the trade agreement with South Africa amid an ongoing crisis in the Spanish citrus sector.

During a recent meeting with Valencia's Member of European Parliament (MEP) Inmaculada Rodríguez-Piñero, Rubinacci also said that he would like to arrange a meeting with representatives of the Spanish citrus sector, according to Spanish website [Valencia Plaza](#) [in Spanish].

Under a 2016 trade agreement, South Africa has tariff-free access to the EU for certain citrus products from June to Oct. 15, with the tariffs from Oct. 15 until Nov. 30 to slowly be reduced and eventually eliminated by 2027. Tariffs remain in place for the period from Dec. 1 through May 30.

Rubinacci is in charge of evaluating the application of the safeguard clauses, which would limit trade. According to Rodríguez-Piñero, he is "fully aware that there is a problem" in the citrus sector.

Spanish citrus growers – a large portion of whom are based in Valencia – have said that prices have been unsustainably low, attributing the problem to the rise of imports from countries like Morocco, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa. The sector has put heavy pressure on the European Commission to take action.

Various measures have been taken to try to alleviate the crisis. In December, Spain's Ministry of Agriculture withdrew 50,000 metric tons (MT) of Spanish citrus from the market to protect prices, however, according to the agricultural organizations, losses are in excess of €100 million this season year-on-year.

Citrus imports rose by 40% between 2013 and 2018, according to EuroStat data. In 2018 South Africa was the biggest supplier of citrus fruit, rising by 26% over the six years to 813,318 metric tons (MT), although Egypt, Turkey and Morocco all saw bigger rises in percentage terms.

Rubinacci also said that in order to move forward, the citrus sector should have a spokesperson in Brussels who can convey industry's concerns, adding that any decisions will be made by the economic bloc based on hard data. The priority is to find out "what the exact problem is", he was quoted as saying.

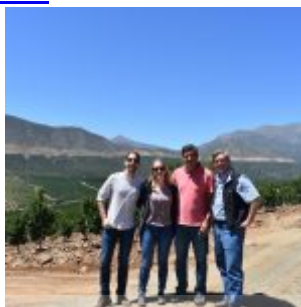
But he said that the European Union seeks to solve European problems, not national ones, and urged Spanish producers from Castellón, Valencia, Andalusia, Murcia and Tarragona to join forces with Italian and Greek citrus growers.

Achieving "the sector's unity at the highest level," as well as the presentation of verifiable figures is essential for the EU to take action, he was quoted as saying.

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