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New 'politically motivated' EU regulations could see R654 million of SA citrus destroyed

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An estimated 3.2 million cartons of citrus valued at R605m (€38.4m) currently en route to the European Union could potentially be destroyed after the region introduced new regulations regarding the cold treatment of oranges.

Citrus Growers' Association special envoy for market access and EU matters, Deon Joubert, said authorities could potentially destroy the citrus after the European Union's (EU) Standing Committee on Plant, Animal, Food and Feed (Scopaff) published "drastic and arguably misinformed" new regulations requiring the cold treatment of oranges to address False Codling Moth (FCM) interceptions from southern African orange exports. He said the regulations had been implemented without warning, giving local producers no time to comply.

The new regulations were published in the Official Journal of the European Union on June 21, despite objections from several countries, including European markets that currently import South African oranges. The regulations will be enforced from July 14.

“There are currently numerous shipments of citrus fruit en route to the EU, with phytosanitary certificates issued before July 14 based on South Africa's existing systems approach. These shipments will reach the EU after July 14, by which time the EU's new phytosanitary requirements will apply. As a result, an estimated 3.2m cartons of citrus valued at R605m (€38.4m) en route to the region could potentially be destroyed by authorities,” Joubert said.

The regulations make extensive changes to the current applicable phytosanitary requirements for citrus coming from South Africa. They require imports of citrus fruit to undergo specified mandatory cold treatment processes and precooling steps for specific periods (up to 25 days of cold treatment) before importation.

Joubert said the new requirements differed significantly from South Africa's existing rigorous FCM Risk Management System, which had been “highly effective” in protecting European production from the threat of pests or disease, over several years. He said the existing system was supported by the results of studies published in international peer-reviewed scientific journals.

“The nature of the cold treatment prescribed in the new regulations is contrary to scientific evidence, making it an arbitrary, unjustified, and unnecessarily trade-restrictive measure and accordingly contravenes international requirements for such phytosanitary trade regulations,” Joubert said.

SA citrus growers export 800 000 tonnes of high-quality citrus fruit to the EU annually, yet FCM interceptions have been consistently low, with just 19 (2019), 14 (2020) and 15 (2021) interceptions over the past three years. This is in stark contrast to FCM interceptions from other third importing countries, which have been much higher - with 53, 129 and 58 interceptions over the same period. However, no measures have been proposed against these countries.

“A significant portion of South Africa’s commercial orange production will also not be able to withstand the new prescribed cold treatment. Organic and “chem-free” oranges are particularly prone to chilling injury and will be most severely impacted, even though no FCM interceptions have been reported in the EU on these environmentally friendly and sustainable orange types,” Joubert said.

He added that SA authorities were engaging with their counterparts in the EU to request that they reconsider the regulations which carried no technical weight and appeared to be “a politically motivated move by Spanish producers to freeze out southern African citrus from the European market”.

“This will not only result in large gaps in the supply chain and higher prices for European consumers at a time when the region faces the real risk of food insecurity due

to the ongoing Ukraine-Russian conflict, but will also severely threaten the sustainability and profitability of the South African citrus industry,” he said.

The move is likely to put 140 000 jobs, mostly in rural areas, at risk.

“The massively unjustified potential destruction of millions of cartons of fruit also comes at a time when the EU has prioritised minimising food waste in supply chains across the region. The fact that authorities are trying to enforce these new regulations a mere 23 days after publication, making it impossible for South African growers to comply, highlights how unjustified and discriminatory this legislation is,” he said.

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