

SA and Spain are citrus partners, diplomat tells JCCI

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Spain's ambassador to South Africa, Raimundo Robredo Rubio.

Spain's ambassador to South Africa, Raimundo Robredo Rubio, downplayed his country's involvement in driving phytosanitary measures restricting local citrus exports to the European Union, during the Annual Conference of the Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI).

He referred loosely to preventative measures aimed at protecting the EU against citrus black spot (CBS) and false codling moth (FCM) infestations, measures that require South Africa to comply with inordinately rigorous phytosanitary regulations.

But apart from acrimony reported in the media over perceived access unfairness in relation to EU markets, skewed in favour of Spain over persistent CBS and FCM restrictions imposed on South Africa, Robredo Rubio said there were citrus synergies between the two countries.

“What people don't know is that Spain is a big producer of citrus in South Africa.

“We have Spanish companies producing oranges in South Africa and exporting fruit to Spain when the season changes.”

He said that as the world's biggest citrus producer, Spain was well aware of the growing demand for oranges worldwide, which accounts for at least 60% of its exports of the fruit.

Robredo Rubio said that what the two citrus-producing countries had in common, was a shared desire to continue meeting the growing demand of global consumers.

“We don't want them to look for alternative fruit.”

However, had it not been for the phytosanitary restrictions weighing on local exports, Spain's citrus volumes to the EU could have been eroded by South African competition.

Apart from the logistical complexity of shipping fruit to the EU compared to Spain's proximity to markets in Germany, Poland, France, Italy and the Netherlands, South African citrus growers currently spend approximately R3.7 billion annually to comply with EU measures.

Disputes declared with the World Trade Organization earlier this year over FCM and CBS were premised on the general industry consensus that the EU measures were unscientific and excessively restrictive.

The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (dtic) added that the financial burden of these measures limited the ability of South African producers to compete effectively in the EU market, a sentiment supported by the Citrus Growers' Association of South Africa.

The local industry has said that, if the phytosanitary restrictions were relaxed or eliminated, it could produce an additional 100 million 15kg cartons over the next eight years, creating around 100 000 jobs and generating an extra R20 billion in annual revenue.

According to government trade data, the EU accounts for about one-third of South Africa's citrus exports, which remain constrained by restrictive regulations.

The dtic has stated that the EU's measures lack sufficient scientific justification and are not uniformly applied. They contend that existing pest management systems in South Africa are effective enough to ensure safe exports without the need for such stringent restrictions.

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