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Think tank warns of potential impact on South African agriculture of EU pesticide bans

22ND JANUARY 2025 BY: REBECCA CAMPBELL - CREAMER MEDIA SENIOR DEPUTY EDITOR



South African think tank, the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP), has warned that the EU's

European Green Deal strategic roadmap could pose a challenge for South African agriculture, in the coming years. The aim of this roadmap is to make agriculture more sustainable and help combat climate change.

The EU's central strategy to implement the European Green Deal is designated "Farm to Fork" (F2F). A significant element in F2F is a severe cut in the use of both "more hazardous" pesticides, and pesticides in general. Although the original accelerated timescale of such cuts – 50% by 2030, in both cases – has been abandoned, due to fierce opposition within Europe, such cuts in

pesticide use, and the banning or severe restriction of certain chemical pesticides could still be expected to happen.

F2F contains the concept of a “mirror” clause, which will require countries exporting agricultural produce to the EU to adopt the same production and input (including pesticide) restrictions as those adopted by the EU. Although South Africa is itself phasing out the use of certain chemicals in agriculture, because they are carcinogenic, mutagenic, or reproductively toxic, there are pesticides on the EU’s initial, or “indicative” list, that are used by South African farmers. These are the herbicides 2,4-D, Acetochlor, Atrazine, and Bromoxynil; the insecticides Benfuracarb, Chlorpyrifos, Indoxacarb, Permethrin, and Thiamethoxam (but note that Chlorpyrifos was banned in South Africa with effect from November 1 last year); and the fungicides Carbendazim, Epoxiconazole, and Picoxystrobin.

There are alternatives to these pesticides, but most are more expensive.

The BFAP looked at the potential impact of such bans on four major South African agricultural sectors – maize, pome fruits, table grapes and citrus.

Regarding maize, “[f]armers not using the indicated pesticides could spend between R30 and R250 per hectare more on pest control, but yields are not expected to be affected substantially in ‘normal’ seasons. Increased pest pressure might result in substantially higher pest control expenditure and yield impacts,” pointed out the BFAP. “The price premium will have to cover additional pest control costs, prioritised storage costs as well as administrative costs associated with traceability and identity preservation certification.” Nevertheless, the EU is not a major market for South African maize farmers.

However, for the pome fruit sector, the outlook is more challenging. While the EU takes 8% of South African apple exports, it takes 28% of pear exports and is the biggest single export market for South African pears. And EU approval for the active chemical agents within pesticides used by the South African pome fruit sector has already expired. Alternatives exist, but are more expensive and might require more frequent application. And there will probably be a decline in quality as well.

“It is projected that producers will first try to absorb the additional cost, and centre decisions around new orchard establishment,” said the think tank. “Based on BFAP’s farm-level and sector modelling, the first impacts will be observed from 2028, and by 2033 3.5% of apple and just over 3% of pear hectares will be lost due to the higher base cost, combined with the marginal shift in marketing channel – increased processing and less exports – as a consequence of the quality impact. While not devastating for the industry at a national level, the impact at an individual farm level will be substantial. Fewer producers result in fewer jobs on farms and in packhouses, along with weaker demand for packing space, infrastructure, critical inputs, and more.”

The South African table grapes export sector is overwhelmingly dependent on the EU and UK markets, with 57% of exports going to the former and 20% to the latter. Again, key active ingredients in pesticides used by the sector are no longer approved in the EU. “A scenario was run in BFAP’s sector model, assuming producers switch to the less expensive but also less effective [active ingredient] cymoxanil,” reported the think tank. “In this scenario, the cost of control reduces by R1 500/ha, but there is a likely 10% reduction in export pack-outs in 70% of the industry. Vineyard and/or packhouse labour expenditure will increase as

pace slows due to more cutting work that is required to make the best of a lower-quality harvest.”

Citrus fruit is South Africa’s biggest single agricultural export, and South Africa is the world’s second largest citrus exporter, after Spain. No less than 71% of South African citrus production is exported (another 24% is converted into juices). The EU was the largest single export market, taking 36% of exports in 2023. Many (but not all) South African citrus farmers have to counter pests that do not exist in Europe, and the banning of certain active ingredients by the EU could be challenging for them.

“It is expected that most [citrus] producers will be able to adapt to the changing conditions, although it should be noted that the destruction of biological assets (orchards) is not introduced with the scenario. Consequently, job losses should be minimal, and perhaps more visible in packhouses than at primary production level,” reported the BFAP. “The long-term impact of the removal of said active ingredients on orchards and pests is however unknown. It is possible that vector control could become a major issue, aggravated by the acceleration of pest prevalence in the regions due to a lapse in suppression and/or resistance build-up on the available control methods.”

“The European Green Deal and the F2F strategy in its current form present challenges, and some regionally-specific pockets of opportunity for South African agriculture,” concluded the BFAP. “While the move towards more sustainable farming practices is commendable, the economic feasibility and practical implementation of these changes need careful consideration. South African farmers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders must work together to navigate these changes and ensure the continued viability of the agricultural sector.”

The BFAP report is entitled 'European Green Deal and South African Agriculture: The potential impact of reduced pest control options'. 🇺🇪

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