

UK-EU SPS deal threatens South African citrus trade

When the United Kingdom left the European Union in 2021, the change created new opportunities for South African citrus exports. The UK was able to set its own import rules, allowing lemons, oranges, and other citrus fruits to enter without a plant health certificate or inspection. This made the market attractive for South African exporters.

That situation may change as the UK prepares to align with EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures under the so-called UK-EU reset deal. This would mean the UK would adopt EU citrus import rules.

Since 2022, EU regulations have required South African exporters to apply cooling treatments to fruit to limit the spread of false codling moth and citrus black spot, along with supplying phytosanitary certificates. Exporters argue these measures increase costs and raise the risk of spoilage, especially for organic fruit. South Africa has launched two dispute settlement cases at the World Trade Organization, claiming the EU rules are unscientific and discriminatory. The EU defends them as necessary and scientifically justified.

The possible UK move has raised concern among South African officials and exporters. A government representative told POLITICO they had informally engaged with the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but that formal talks had not yet started. "Whatever they do with the EU, hopefully it will not affect other trading partners," the official said. One option under discussion is labelling consignments of South African citrus destined only for the UK to prevent re-export to the EU.

Boitshoko Ntshabele, CEO of the South African Citrus Growers' Association, said "things are in a very early stage, with nothing set in stone." He added, "What is clear, however, is that the EU's current plant health measures on citrus black spot and false codling moth are unscientific. These measures restrict trade unnecessarily." Ntshabele also warned that restricting South African citrus would affect UK consumers unless exemptions were introduced.

In the UK, importers also see risks if EU-style controls are introduced. Nigel Jenney, CEO of the Fresh Produce Consortium, said it would create "a huge additional burden at the border" and added, "if it occurs, there are significant additional costs the industry will have to pay, which sadly can only be passed on to the consumer." He urged the UK to negotiate exemptions for non-EU produce such as South African citrus.

Currently, the UK grows around one-third of its fresh produce, with another third imported from Europe and the remainder from other regions. A carve-out for citrus may be possible. The UK-EU summit in May outlined that the SPS deal could include a "short list of exceptions to dynamic alignment." Negotiations are expected to begin later this year.

A UK government spokesperson said, "We are removing barriers to trade so UK businesses can sell more products in new markets around the world as part of our Plan for Change."

Source: Politico (<https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-eu-reset-south-africa-citrus-export-business-brexite-pests/>)

Frontpage photo: © Barmalini | Dreamstime

Publication date: Thu 9 Oct 2025

-
-

