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Press Release

.../for immediate release

SA-EU citrus trade stays in the limelight

As those who have been following the recent media coverage on South Africa's citrus exports to the European Union will know, there is currently a real difficulty over fruit contaminated by a fungal growth called Citrus Black Spot (CBS). Interested readers will have noted that CBS significantly lowers the retail value of affected produce by visibly marking the peel of affected fruit.

A number of local reporters have been quick to opportunistically portray the European Union, South Africa's biggest export destination for citrus fruit, as having unreasonably and unfairly implemented new measures to protect its own citrus producers. They claim that the European Union, without scientific basis, is threatening to use what experts refer to as "phytosanitary legislation" to prevent South African citrus produce from entering the EU's 500 million strong consumer market.

It is true that the European Commission has given notice that, once a threshold of five CBS-contaminated shipments of citrus fruit originating in South Africa and landing at EU ports of entry has been reached, it would propose possible measures to the EU Council of Ministers on the basis of new consultations with the South African authorities. Some targeted restrictions of the country's citrus exports to the EU could conceivably be one of the options.

Local producers argue that this is unfair and claim that climatic conditions in Europe's citrus growing regions are not conducive to the CBS fungus spreading to European orchards – at present CBS free. They maintain that the fungus does not grow in Mediterranean conditions as historically also evidenced by citrus fruit originating from the Western Cape apparently remaining unaffected.

So what does the scientific evidence currently say? A first opinion by EFSA, which provides independent scientific advice to EU risk managers in the feed and food sectors, was adopted in 2008. It concluded that, while the EU was CBS-free, it could not be supported that its climate was "unsuitable for the establishment of CBS" and that "CBS may be transferred to suitable hosts by means of splash dispersal from citrus black spot infected citrus fruit and peel".

This contradicts local assertions that there is no risk of contamination of the EU's CBS-free areas through imports. It must be added that this opinion was based on the examination of documents provided by the South African authorities. Also, a recent EU interception of CBS-contaminated fruit reportedly originated in the Western Cape – as noted above, from an area believed to have been CBS-free. Should this report be confirmed, it would seem that CBS, in fact, can proliferate in Mediterranean-like climates.

Despite this, South Africa has initiated a dispute settlement procedure at the International Plant Protection Convention (IPCC). The EU, in turn, has pledged to cooperate fully with respect to this procedure, currently on hold pending a new EFSA opinion. In this regard EFSA is currently examining new evidence provided by South Africa and will give its final opinion in December this year. The EU is ready to review and align its import requirements with this EFSA opinion.

But back to the issue of trade management measures: protectionism is not a driver of the EU's actions regarding CBS. EU citrus producers and South African citrus exporters are in effect not in competition as their dissimilar growing seasons complement each other. The EU's citrus-producing countries welcome imports during their off-season as they ensure that commercial and distribution chains remain in place throughout the year.

Apart from this, it stands to reason that producers would wish to grow the best quality fruit possible and would seek pro-actively to minimise the impact of pathogens such as CBS, irrespective of whether they are in South Africa or the EU. Citrus farmers in CBS-prevalent regions have to know that they face a higher risk when putting their produce on the market, and would then commonly seek to diversify export destinations and to beneficiate - in the case of citrus this could take the form of juice or pulp, if not selling their fruit into CBS-tolerant markets.

CBS has been on the agenda between the EU and South Africa since the establishment of the EU's single market in 1992. The established practice is that each consignment of citrus fruit imported into the EU is accompanied by a so-called "phytosanitary certificate", provided by the responsible authority, which guarantees and certifies that it is CBS-free. Official sanitary certificates have to be correct and reliable.

After a first EU audit of South Africa's CBS control procedures in 1998, South Africa implemented an Action Plan to deal with CBS-contaminated produce – this plan then was the subject of EU audits in 2009 and 2011. While pointing to improvements in South Africa's capacity to detect and to fight the disease, these audits also revealed a number of shortcomings. The findings and recommendations were confirmed by the number of CBS-related shipment interceptions in 2011 and 2012, having been 39 and 32 respectively.

Faced with an increased number of interceptions, and without feedback/follow-up from the relevant South African authorities on the earlier audit recommendations, the European Commission in 2012 took the decision to propose to the EU Council of Ministers a new measure regarding CBS, that of a temporary ban on South African citrus exports to the EU once five interceptions of CBS-contaminated produce from South Africa had been reached.

Notwithstanding this, the European Commission, through its services, would consult South Africa after each interception and before any procedure is initiated, a ban being considered as a measure of last resort. There is no automaticity between the 5 interception threshold and a possible ban.

With South Africa annually exporting close to 600,000 tons of citrus, most of it to the EU, and through its production sustaining over 100,000 direct and indirect jobs, and the EU's production of close to 5 million tons of citrus annually and with several million workers employed in the sector, it is in everyone's interest that the necessary attention is given to the CBS problem. The complexity of the issue cannot simply be swept aside and ignored. At all levels - scientific, technical and also political - players will have to continue, and possibly step up, their cooperation and their commitment to maintain the high level of trade flows from South Africa to the EU.

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