

South Africa : calls for EU citrus compromise

South Africa is lobbying for a compromise to allow local citrus fruit to be sold into the European Union next year.

The EU has banned South African citrus imports because of concerns over the fungal black spot disease, but there are warnings a continued ban will lead to empty shelves for European consumers.

South African citrus fruits make up a large chunk of the European Union's total citrus imports and the main source of oranges for juice drunk in Britain, Germany and France during Europe's summer months, so if they were to be banned from the EU on a long-term basis, the European consumer would notice. "You would find virtually no grapefruit in the summer months in Europe, and 70%, as I said of the summer fruits is covered by South Africa so even countries like Brazil, Argentina, Australia, could certainly not make up for that shortfall," said SA Citrus Growers' Association's Rocco Renaldi.

The European Commission says it wants to protect the EU's citrus-producing regions from black spot disease, but South African representatives in Brussels suspect European citrus-producers also sense an opportunity to grow their market share thanks to a ban. "Well certainly there have been communications from particularly the Spanish growers but also the European farmers' organisation calling for an immediate and outright ban on South African citrus fruit," said Renaldi.

Meanwhile, South Africa is proposing a compromise solution - a citrus import ban could be imposed purely for citrus-producing regions of the EU.

"This is something that we're calling for strongly but it's a very difficult conversation in Brussels where the primary consideration is to preserve the integrity of the single market and that there are no barriers in Europe - that said, we have actually drafted a proposal," Renaldi said.

In the meantime South African producers must wait for an EU food safety study on black spots, on which huge amounts hinge for South Africa's citrus industry. The study is due out in the next few weeks.