

Argentina unable to export lemons to US until 2018

Although Argentina has now opened exports of lemons to the United States, until next year it cannot place a single kilo of the fruit. The reason, a striking one, is to be found in the requirements of lemon's coloration for harvest imposed by the United States.

The United States requested, and Argentina accepted, a sanitary protocol, that the color during harvest is to be "yellow green". They imposed that requirement as an argument to minimize any risk of disease entering the fruit as it matured on the tree.

The lemon harvest, which accepts fruit of at least 60 centimeters in diameter, goes from April to September. 90% of the collection is concentrated during that period. The harvest had already finished by the 13th of the present month. Between November and January another 10% of the harvest is usually undertaken, but it is not of export quality.

The industry uses an eight-color table, from deep green to yellow. The type of lemon "yellow green" for the USA, should be harvested between May and July.

After several comings and goings, and after US President Donald Trump, within hours of assuming office, reversed an authorization from his predecessor Barack Obama, last May the US accepted its entry. But the definitive confirmation for Argentine lemons arrived on August 17. It was too late, say industry sources, to have the lemon color requested by that country.

"There is no one to export to in the US this year because there are no lemons within the harvest protocol's color. It is something that limits you. There is no fruit in the condition to export to that country, although there is to other destinations," said one businessman. "That range of yellow-green is determined by harvesting, because then the fruit follows its evolution," he added.

In short, the lemon for that market must be harvested before it turns yellow, although in reality it later arrives yellow at the destination.

Yellow always travels. In fact, after the harvest, he packs it and puts it in a chamber where it "loses green", as they say in the sector. Meanwhile, the fruit still matures on the trip and becomes more yellow.

"It's not that they do not want the lemon to be yellow, but to minimize any disease within the fruit on the tree, they want those colors during harvest," the source said.

Some argue that this requirement, and the late final US approval, was so as to not irritate California producers, the same ones who in 2001 got a court ruling that left the Argentine lemons out of that market. The United States consumes about 630,000 tonnes of fresh lemon. Everything is supplied by California, except for a 5% that comes from imports, with Chile among the other markets.

Although the fruit that the US wants is not available, Argentina has other markets available. With lower requirements, at the end of last July, Mexico approved importation from Argentina and the country made its first export, which was made by the San Miguel citrus fruit company.

After the US's opening of its market to lemons (although exports will only be made in 2018), the sector is also looking for this country to allow the exporting of sweet citrus.

According to Senasa figures on fresh lemons, Argentina, the world's leading producer with 80% of its production in Tucumán, exported in the first seven months of the year 208,913 tonnes, 7% less than in the same period of 2016. The bulk of the export went to European countries.

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