

'Staggering' financial and management costs of CBS measures are disproportionate to the risk

Rigid EU stance on CBS overburdens South African citrus industry

The scientific dispute between the EU and the South African citrus industry has again resulted in stalemate as the latter's three proposals to manage citrus black spot (CBS) in a more financially and environmentally sustainable manner were summarily rejected. This season there were two interceptions of CBS among the 800,000 tonnes of South African fruit landing in the EU, and neither of them contained viable spores capable of disease transmission.

Three proposals by SA delegation

At the seasonal review meeting between the EU Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG Santé) and the South African delegation in Brussels on 27 November, South Africa proposed that viable spores must be detected for a notification of non-compliance (NONC), a principle that has in the past been supported by DG Santé, along with its corollary that only leaves carry viable spores, but the Standing Committee for Plant Health has since rejected the scientific principle.

The second proposal of the South African delegation concerned reviving the option of allowing CBS-infected fruit through a closed and audited supply chain to juice factories where the peel is destroyed (juicing derogation), as proposed by the European Commission itself in 2016 but vetoed by the Standing Committee on Plant Health.

The third proposal entails placing the matter before the International Plant Protection Convention for arbitration, but the EU has repeatedly vetoed independently selected IPPC scientific panels while South Africa has not offered objections to any of the panels.

Astronomical cost of CBS management

These days, the entire pest management strategy of South African citrus farmers in the summer rainfall areas – CBS has never taken hold in the Mediterranean climate of the Western Cape – revolves



around this fungus. A constant spraying programme ensures that an orchard is never unprotected for a single day and it has been successful. Detections have never been as low as this season. However, complete eradication of the fungus is close to a physical impossibility (there were 17 interceptions from Argentina and 12 from Brazil this past season).

The constant vigilance against what is regarded by the rest of the world as a cosmetic disease, is coming at a very high price: R1,86 billion (more than 119 million euros). Currently the industry is able to shoulder the financial cost, but the implications are spilling over to employment opportunities and the consumer.

The South African citrus industry occupies a very important role in the country's economy, currently in a recession, through creating at least 10,000 new employment opportunities per year and generating significant foreign income.

Jean-Claude Juncker: Africa needs a fair partnership

Deon Joubert, the Citrus Growers' Association's special envoy to the EU, quotes EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's 2018 State of the Union Speech: "Africa does not need charity, it needs true and fair partnership. And we, Europeans need this partnership just as much. Today, we are proposing a new alliance for sustainable investment and jobs between Europe and Africa."

The South African view is that the only solution sustainable over the longterm lies in finding common ground between itself and the EU, without overstepping on the diverging scientific views on CBS.

Mutual accusations of protectionism

While the South Africans have always called the rigid EU stance on CBS a form of protectionism, the EU earlier this year accused South Africa of the same in imposing tariffs on European poultry imports. The Business Day has quoted a letter written by the European Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade to Pres Juncker, in which South Africa, "largely benefiting from the trade concessions made by the EU", was accused of not being open to dialogue and that "only 'rapport de force' and confrontation have an effect on the SA authorities".