

*Inge Ribbens, GroentenFruit Huis:*

## **"Political pressure trumps scientific facts in new EU rule on cold treatment of South African oranges"**

In Europe, there is new legislation regarding the refrigerated treatment of African oranges. It has also hit the Dutch fruit and vegetable trade sector hard. "Our main point is that the proposed measures are disproportionate and not scientifically based. Political pressure has pushed the whole process through," says Inge Ribbens of GroentenFruit Huis. "These regulations are being enforced, mid-season, when the large volumes are just about to start up. That's an utter disgrace."

"We already stressed to the European Commission (EC) to take its time to investigate the case. But there's a lot of pressure to implement the new rules this season, while there's no crisis at all. They could have used this year as a transition year and looked at what's actually already being done in South Africa. We don't think they have a good idea about that."

"South Africa - a developing country, mind you - invests no less than €200 million annually in a highly advanced system. It has guarantees and controls that prevent the spread of both Citrus Black Spot (CBS) and False Codling Moth (FCM). The EU is putting a great deal of effort into developing Africa's economy, but by closing borders like this, it's achieving the opposite," Inge continues.

### **Ugandan bell peppers**

"We fully support the premise of protecting the EU from pests and diseases, and the Netherlands is in an important production and export position. But the phytosanitary import policy must be based on genuine risks and affect trade as little as possible. As a receiving party, you must also take responsibility and take preventive measures to protect products. Following an FCM discovery in 2009, the United States banned Dutch bell pepper and chili imports."

"The culprit: Ugandan peppers being stored in a Dutch greenhouse. The sector then decided not to allow imported products access to Dutch greenhouses. Thus, the Southern EU member states considered not bringing imported products into their packing facilities. These are often in the middle of their growing areas. They also looked at establishing so-called 'protected zones'," explains Inge.

"It remains to be seen why, if FCM is truly such a serious concern, all the attention is on South African oranges. They're not finding more False Codling Moths on that product. In fact, in oranges, there are fewer and fewer finds. Since FCM was declared an EU quarantine pest a few years ago, there were 15, 12, and 8 interceptions on South African oranges.

"Those were in 2019, 2020, and 2021 respectively, while huge quantities were imported. This number of finds out of 31,000 shipments proves there's no crisis - 99.98% of shipments were allowed through. That's also disproportionate to other products, where there have been far more interceptions at much lower import volumes," Ribbens says.

### **Technical committees' voting ratio**

Inge points out that, in this case, the Dutch government (Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority/Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality) is fully committed to Dutch interests. Also, it bases its phytosanitary import policy on the correct principles. "Minister Staghouter recently took a strong stand during the Cabinet meeting in Brussels. He was the only one opposed to a Spanish call for stricter import requirements for citrus from, particularly, South Africa. He insisted that import measures must be future-proof and feasible for third countries."

"But even if you're the biggest importing country, the EC's technical committees vote according to population size. And the Dutch share is less than four percent. Fortunately, this month, a motion by Dutch Member of Parliament Klink was adopted. It wants the government to work towards making EU import policy well-

founded again, based on the WTO Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement's principles," Inge continues.

What now? She says the South Africans are working tooth and nail to see what is possible. "There aren't enough facilities to allow the entire volume to undergo the mandatory pre-cooling, especially since it's the middle of the current season. Also, the cold treatment creates far more food and other waste."

"Plus," Inge adds. "it's vital to note that various orange varieties cannot cope with this temperature at all. Especially organic oranges, which already have a high loss rate due to the current temperature regime, will be enormously affected. That's in total contravention to EU policy and the Green Deal. These are trying to increase the organic share."

"We're generally convinced these rules will, needlessly, damage our sector. South African citrus imports are worth € 650-700 million per year. These rules could halve that, cause supply gaps, or disrupt that developing country's vital socio-economic sector. Thus, on behalf of the Belgian and German trade associations too, we've called for a review of the procedures. But the harsh reality is that our importers are directly facing the consequences of this legislation," Inge concludes.

For more information:

Website: [www.groentenfruihuis.nl](http://www.groentenfruihuis.nl)

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