Different interpretations of new cold protocol holds up South African oranges in Portuguese port



In the Portuguese port of Sines there are containers with South African oranges of which some have been waiting for over two weeks to be cleared, and their number has since grown with the arrival of a second vessel last week.

Ironically, much of the fruit is destined for Spain from where demand for oranges has been strong, as South Africa has sent between 7 and 8% fewer navels and Valencias to Europe.

Many South African exporters have already finished sending oranges to Europe. The duty deadline is Friday and the containers need to be inspected and cleared before then.

“You sit with your hands cut off, while the shipping lines are asking us demarrage,” says an exporter.

“The demand for oranges is higher because less was sent. Towards the end of the season our phone was ringing off the hook for oranges,” she says. “With the new protocol much less was sent to Europe than usual. Prices are consequently good at this stage and sales are going well, but when the costs come off at the end of the day we’ll have to see what our returns are.”

“It’s theoretically not our problem but the customers are complaining a lot about it,” says another exporter.

Cold treatment starts on day of stuffing

According to Deon Joubert, the CGA’s envoy to the EU, the situation has arisen from a difference in interpretation of the new cold protocol. “The Portuguese national plant protection organisation interpreted it differently: the date on which the shipment was loaded onto the vessel was taken by them as the start of the cold regime, even if the stuffing date when the fruit was loaded into the container might have been a week earlier.”

He also points out that pulp temperature is not a precondition for EU market access, but instead the set point temperature of a container.

“The day of stuffing/loading of the container should be used as an indication of when the cold treatment starts, but unfortunately it is not indicated on the phytosanitary certificate. Only the PPECB [Perishable Product Export Control Board] addendum contains this information. The Department of Agriculture Rural Development and Land Reform [DALRRD] is looking into adding this to the phytosanitary certificate,” explains Werner van Rooyen, COO at the Fresh Produce Exporters Forum.

“The Delivery Air Temperature and setpoint of each container need to be used to measure the temperature of every container. It’s important to take note that the PPECB approves and signs off on every consignment’s temperature set point before shipment, to ensure compliance. The phytosanitary certificate, approved and signed off by DALRRD, serves as official proof that the consignment complies with EU regulations.”

South Africa carries costs of disparities in interpretation

Werner adds that they have not experienced the same problem at the other larger import ports of the EU.

"Given the disparity in the interpretation of the EU regulation by the different EU member states, South African exporters must shoulder the resulting financial costs," he notes.

“It has hopefully now been sorted out,” Deon says, “Relatively few containers are affected and they are being cleared but it has taken a long time and it wasn’t a helpful exercise. It will have financial implications for the industry. It’s not a serious crisis but it has been an annoyance, coming as it did at the end of a year which really wasn’t great.”

Publication date: Tue 11 Oct 2022
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