

# SA ready to fight EU ban on citrus fruit

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The government was ready to take the European Union (EU) to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to challenge its objections to imports of SA's citrus fruit due to black spot, Trade and Industry Minister Rob Davies said on Tuesday, 9 September 2014.



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SA, which earns about R3bn a year from citrus exports, has informally appealed to Argentina and the US to make a combined application to the WTO as their exports have also suffered under EU sanitary and phytosanitary rules.

Davies told MPs he was convinced that the EU was using these rules as a protectionist measure to block imports because there was no scientific basis for its claim that citrus black spot (CBS) could infect European orchards.

Earlier this week farmers from CBS-affected farms voluntarily agreed not to send their fruit to the EU, in a bid to prevent a total ban on all fruit imports from SA.

The EU has already made four interceptions over CBS and has warned of a ban in the event of five interceptions of consignments.

The industry and the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries are in discussions with the EU to resolve the impasse.

But Davies said his expectations about what these talks would deliver were "pretty low" given the EU's record.

If the industry and the department decided to use the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism, the department is ready to act, Davies said in a briefing to Parliament's trade and industry portfolio committee.

"We can't just sit by idly if we are going to have to take 10%-15% off our exports. I think this is what they (the EU) probably

want, so some of their players can occupy that space," Davies said.

He stressed the importance of being tough in the negotiations.

Davies said that in his experience it was "only when you threaten to retaliate do you get anywhere". He said: "When you say please, please, please you actually just get rolled over. This is a jungle.

"If anyone thinks that this [the EU's approach] is informed by developmentalism, they must think again. The least convincing argument I have made to the EU on the CBS is the need to protect 80,000 jobs. They could not give a fig about that."

The government's special adviser on trade, Faizel Ismail, explained that the WTO's sanitary and phytosanitary rules allowed countries to make regulations to protect their citizens from the spread of disease.

"But these rules have to be in conformity with certain standards that are legitimate and subject to science-based evidence," he said.

Davies told MPs there was "a hugely disputed science as to how black spot can be passed on to another orchard", saying: "Some argue that the disease is spread by the leaves, not the fruit. I need to be convinced that this is driven by science and not by protectionism. The science is disputed."

EU delegation head Roeland van de Geer said SA and the countries in the bloc were working closely together to fight CBS.

The EU welcomed the decision to export citrus only from CBS-free areas, but was "keen to continue its consultations with SA on how CBS is transmitted", he said.

Source: Business Day

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