



The World Banana Forum (WBF)

Working together for sustainable banana production and trade

Report of the multistakeholder discussion session at Fruit Attraction 2023 (FA23)

Attended by representatives of all constituent groups

4 October 2023

Fresh Food Logistic Summit – IFEMA (Madrid, Spain)

Title: Regulation on the use of phytosanitary products and its impact on the fruit aesthetic. Is it possible to educate consumers with the help of the European Union?

Time: 16:00 - 17:00


Speakers:

- **Juri Mara (DG AGRI)**
- **Maria Tabernero (DG SANTI)**
- **Morag Webb (COLEAD)**
- **Sergio Laprade (CORBANA)**
- **Patricio Rodriguez (DOLE)**

European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) / European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE)

Mr Juri Mara, Financial Economist Officer (DG AGRI), and Ms Maria Tabernero, Policy Officer (DG SANTE), offered their perspective on EU regulations affecting banana production and trade, focusing on fruit aesthetics and maximum residue limits (MRL), respectively. Mr Mara opened the floor by illustrating key aspects of the EU banana market, including production and market distribution. For instance, the total banana supply in 2022 reached 5.55 million tonnes, with 74,72% originating from Latin America, 14,72% from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and 10,50% from Europe. However, despite the steady sector expansion, there was a slight decrease in supply in 2022 due to multiple factors, including supply shortages at critical production sites, rising costs along the global supply chain, depreciation of the US dollar and the negative impact of La Palma's volcanic eruption on banana production. According to a 2022 report from the European Commission (EC), European subsidies schemes in favour of the outermost regions of the Union contributed to the preservation of banana production in the EU. It also states that no further concessions on import tariffs from Latin American countries will be granted. Mr Mara then discussed recent revisions on EU marketing standards whose main goals are to protect consumers and to facilitate trade. In recent years, DG AGRI has undertaken efforts to update and modernize these standards, aligning them with the Farm-to-Fork strategy, which revolves around educating consumers and reducing food wastes. Regarding consumer education, the latest reform has proposed the following changes to the standards of bananas: 1) origin labelling will be extended to cover ripened bananas and; 2) characters used for the indication of origin will be larger and made more visible to the consumer. Concerning food waste, the latest reform proposed to 1) exempt bananas from compliance with basic general marketing standard for cases of *force majeure* (e.g., volcano eruption) or for products sold by producer within a given production area; 2) remove the requirement that bananas must be presented in clusters of at least four fingers and; 3) exempt products intended for donation from complying with any of the 11 specific marketing standards. This reform, which involved an open public consultation, is currently under scrutiny by the European Parliament and Council and should enter into force on the 1st of January 2025.

Ms Tabernero then provided an overview of EU pesticide regulations and its alignment with the EU's Green Deal and Farm-to-Fork strategy. The first set (EC No 1107/2009) addresses the market placement of plant protection products (PPP) at the EU level, governing which active substances can be used and/or renewed, with member states (MS)



responsible for implementation. The second set addresses the sustainable use of pesticides through good agricultural practices (GAP) and the promotion of integrated pest management (IPM). The third and last set (EC No 396/2005) focuses on MRLs with the aim to protect consumer's health and facilitate trade. Ms Tabernero outlined the process for MRL setting, which involves a first risk assessment phase with an evaluation by a Rapporteur MS, followed by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), and a second risk management phase through a voting process of a draft Regulation proposed by the European Commission followed by a scrutiny phase with the Council, and the European Parliament. Ms Tabernero noted that EU MRLs policy is to align with the Codex MRL which are adopted if they are deemed safe for consumers by the competent EU authority (EFSA). She then highlighted that the [2021 EU report on pesticide residue in food](#) found that out of 1241 samples analysed most banana samples (98.7%) were compliant with EU MRLs. In some cases, multiple residues were identified in banana samples. Moreover, there seems to be an increase in non-compliant samples between 2018 and 2022.

In conclusion, Mr Mara emphasized the substantial funding opportunities for agricultural Research & Innovation (R&I) within the EU, with Horizon Europe allocating up to EUR 9 billion for R&I in Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture, and Environment.

Questions and Answers

A field officer from the Canary Islands pointed out the apparent misalignment between the EU's Green Deal and Agenda for 2030 with the existing EU marketing standards, which heavily prioritize fruit aesthetics. She inquired about the most effective approach to radically shift retailers' and consumers' perception of these quality standards. Mr Mara explained that EU reforms entail engaging with multiple stakeholders with differing interests and that the current proposal is the result of discussions and compromises between Member States delegates.


Mr Smith asked about the practical implications of mandatory origin labelling. Mr Mara clarified that, previously, origin labelling was only mandatory at importation ("green bananas") but not mandatory at the ripening stage level and sometimes even at the retail level. Now, it will be necessary throughout the entire supply chain.

Committee Linking Entrepreneurship – Agriculture – Development (COLEAD)

Ms Morag Webb, Head of Science and Policy (COLEAD), introduced COLEAD, a non-profit private sector association representing the fruit and vegetables export sector. She provided an overview of the challenges faced by the banana industry, from the rising costs of agricultural inputs to the declining retail prices, from consumer exacting demands to a shrinking pest management toolbox. The industry is continuously tasked with meeting ever evolving and stringent EU requirements, alongside specific requests from retailers. Meanwhile the approval process for new active substances is slow, and there is limited investment in biological alternatives. Ms Webb then shed light on the specific targets and ambitions of the EU's Green deal and Farm-to-Fork strategy, noting that the mirror clause narrative is currently used, mainly to restrict trade distortions and prevent trade advantages. She also stressed that within the context of EU pesticide regulations, fewer pesticides approvals are issued, the precautionary approach prevails for new substances and there are numerous exceptions where the EU does not accept the Codex MRL. Moreover, preparing dossiers to request import tolerance for substances not authorised in the EU is a time consuming and expensive process, which manufacturers are unlikely to do without a guarantee of commercial return. Additionally, in the context of EU organic regulations, the same regulations are applied to imported organic products from non-EU countries. In the instance where an unapproved PPP used in Latin American countries is found on a banana lot imported by the EU, an additional procedure will be required, and the producer will need to provide justifications. Lastly, Ms Webb highlighted that the MRLs for several critical active substances employed in banana plantations have been lowered to their limits of quantification (LOQ), especially in the case of carbamates, or even banned altogether. This, combined with the limited registration of alternative products and the limited range of available fungicides, carries severe consequences on yield, production costs, profit margins and aesthetic concerns for an industry that is already grappling with significant challenges.

National Banana Corporation of Costa Rica (CORBANA)

Mr Sergio Laprade, Coordinator of the Banana Environmental Commission (CORBANA), began his presentation by stating that EU regulations affect the production of all fruits, not exclusively banana. Lower MRLs will likely result in reduced pesticide use, making plantations more susceptible to pests and diseases, ultimately leading to more defects on the fruit. Thus, it is crucial for consumers to understand that with decreased pesticide use, the cost of perfect bananas meeting marketing standards is likely to rise. Mr Laprade then provided a concise list of insect pests and



diseases affecting bananas, such as thrips, aphids, scale insects, brown spot disease and banana fruit-scarring beetles. In conclusion, he underscored the need to raise consumer awareness on pesticide use, on the one hand, while emphasizing the producer's obligation to use solely EU-authorized products, adopt good agricultural practices, and comply with EU MRL, on the other hand.

DOLE Fresh Fruit International

Mr Patricio Gutierrez, Regional Director of Innovation and Development (DOLE), highlighted the contrast between the EU's precautionary approach and the approach favoured by other countries such as the United States of America, which is based on a scientific assessment of the risk and benefits associated with a product's use. It was noted that each year, 20 active substances used in agriculture are lost, without suitable replacements. In addition, due to the associated costs, R&I into new alternative agrochemicals is primarily focused on the world's most important crops like cereals, with limited attention for bananas. As a consequence of this shrinking toolbox, there is a reduction in the quantity of banana reaching the EU market, with 20% of this reduction attributed to pests and diseases and 60% to physiological defects. Mr Gutierrez then raised the issue of the reduction of use of pesticide-impregnated banana bunch plastic bags, which were originally introduced to prevent broadcast pesticide applications. This reduction is likely to result in more cosmetic damages caused by birds, bats and invertebrates. Furthermore, considering that Sigatoka control is responsible for 80% of pesticide use, any MRL reduction of those fungicides could have severe adverse effects on production. Mr Gutierrez also noted that supermarket chains uphold very high standards and typically demand 33% to 100% of the legal MRL. He concluded by reiterating that the most significant effect of pesticide reduction is on productivity and added that while organic banana production originally benefited from a higher tolerance for cosmetic damage than conventional production, the marketing standards are now nearly identical.