



Report on the Inward Mission from Egypt on Scottish Seed Potatoes 21 - 23 November 2007

Executive Summary

Egypt imports more than a third of all Scottish seed potatoes exported outside the EU. An inward mission from this important market was organised by the BPC and SASA in November 2007 with the aim of improving contacts with Egyptian officials, of discussing phytosanitary import conditions for seed potatoes, and of showing the visitors, in person, how classification, testing, handling and inspection of seed potatoes in Scotland are conducted in practice.

The delegation consisted of two high-ranked plant health officials from the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation. The delegates visited SASA headquarters to attend seminars and discussions with Scottish Government officials, and to take part in a tour of facilities related to the Seed Potato Classification Scheme (SPCS). They were also shown how different parts of the Scottish seed potato industry meet the requirements of the SPCS and Egypt during visits to five different potato businesses. After consultation with the export industry, the inward mission will hopefully be complemented by an outward mission to Egypt in 2008, and/or followed by a further inward mission during the growing season.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of the inward mission was to make personal contact with key plant health officials from Egypt, in particular those involved with setting phytosanitary import conditions for seed potatoes, and to show them how classification, testing, grading and inspection of seed potatoes in Scotland are conducted. The objective was to lay the foundation for more relaxed import conditions for seed potatoes in future Ministerial decrees in Egypt in order to enable a continuation of the increase in the level of trade experienced over the past few years.

Background

Egypt's potato production has expanded rapidly over the past decade. The country is now the biggest potato producing country in Africa with an annual production of around 2.5 million tonnes of ware and processing potatoes. Around 15% of ware is exported, mainly to Europe. The main potato production area is in the Nile River delta in the north of the country. However, more and more production takes place in desert areas which are Pest Free Areas for brown rot. This quarantine disease has been one of the major problems in Egyptian potato production and export. Strict government controls have been put in place with EU assistance to ensure the potato production chain in Egypt is free from the brown rot causing pathogen *Ralstonia solanacearum*.

Egypt relies heavily on the import of high quality seed potatoes for its ware production and it has long been one of Scotland's biggest export markets for seed potatoes. Scottish seed potato exports to Egypt have steadily increased from 5,500 t in 1996 to almost 22,000 t in 2007. This means that more than one third of seed potatoes exported from Scotland outside the EU are now bound for Egypt.

Commercial representatives from Egyptian importers have been visiting Scottish farms to inspect lots before export for many years. Since last season, the majority of Scottish consignments for Egypt are also inspected before export by a government official from Egypt. As a result, very few phytosanitary problems or rejections of Scottish seed potato consignments have been reported from Egypt in recent years, despite the high volume of trade.

Egypt's phytosanitary import tolerances for seed potatoes are laid down by Ministerial Decree. The Minister is advised about which tolerances to apply by the Egyptian Seed Committee which consists of government officials and scientists as well as members of the trade in Egypt. Yet, in 2006, Egypt issued a Ministerial Decree with disease tolerances which were so strict that they were deemed impractical by Egyptian importers. This Decree was therefore never implemented. This year, a new Decree was issued which contained tolerances which were generally much more lenient. However, Egypt's standards for surface diseases are still very strict and far removed from the Scottish minimum export tolerances or UNECE recommendations.

Because of the problems with the Ministerial Decree last season, attempts were made last winter to organise an inward mission to Scotland of those Egyptian plant health officials most involved in setting the import conditions for seed potatoes. Unfortunately, due to other commitments on their part they were not able to visit last year. Plans for an outward mission to Egypt during the summer of 2007 were also postponed to let the Egyptian officials involved concentrate on internal discussions regarding the new Ministerial Decree.

A renewed invitation for a visit to Scotland during the tuber inspection season, funded by the BPC, was issued this year. Two of the four officials invited accepted the invitation and visited Scotland from 21 to 23 November 2007.

Egyptian Inward Mission Delegation members



Dr Ali M. Soliman

Head of the Central Administration of Plant Quarantine (CAPQ),
Vice - Secretary of State of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Cairo



Prof. Dr Salah El-Dein Sherif

Director of the Agricultural Research Center, Plant Pathology Research Institute,
Cairo

Summary of visits

Scottish Agricultural Science Agency – 21 & 23 November 2007

The Egyptian delegation was received at SASA Headquarters by Dr Pieter van de Graaf, Export Liaison Officer, and Dr John Kerr, SPCS Manager, for the first day of the visit.

The programme started with an official welcome to Scotland by Mr Charles Greenslade, Head of the Scottish Government Crops, Plant Health & Pesticides Policy Unit, in presence of Lynne Bradley of Defra, and Dr Kevin O'Donnell, Deputy Director and Head of Rural Scientific Services Division at SASA.

The Egyptian officials attended two seminars:

- An introduction to SASA (Dr John Kerr)
- Scottish seed potato classification and inspection (Dr John Kerr & Dr Pieter van de Graaf)

A copy of the text of the seminars was provided to the visitors by SASA.

The delegates were given a tour of SASA facilities related to the SPCS. Staff from various sections within SASA briefed the visitors on nuclear stock, virus testing, PCN testing, aphid monitoring and SPCS administration.

A discussion of a range of topics (see below) took place throughout the visit.

Issues discussed regarding potato production in Egypt and British seed potato exports

General phytosanitary standard of imports from Scotland

Dr Soliman remarked that he was highly impressed with the quality of Scottish seed potatoes received in Egypt and that he knew of only one Scottish consignment that was officially rejected in Egypt over the past few years.

Brown rot

As brown rot is a major issue in Egyptian potato production, many questions were asked by the visitors regarding the status of brown rot in Scotland and the UK. The brown rot free status of Scotland was explained and details given regarding the sampling and testing regimes in place.

Surface disease tolerances

On the question of the strict tolerances for surface diseases applied by Egypt, Dr Soliman stated that these had been agreed with importers in Egypt to safeguard the quality of ware potatoes produced in Egypt, and that any changes made to these are under constant, detailed scrutiny within Egypt. However, he indicated he was open to future negotiation on this subject.

International standards

Dr Soliman indicated that he believed disease tolerances for seed potato import should be harmonised internationally. The Egyptian visitors were presented with a copy of the UNECE standard for seed potatoes and Dr Soliman expressed an interest in attending the next meeting of the UNECE working group on seed potatoes in Geneva in March 2008. The UNECE Secretariat has been provided by SASA with Dr Soliman's contact details.

Class A seed

Egypt currently restricts the amount of Class A seed allowed to be imported. It was made clear to the visitors that the disease standards to which class A seed is inspected in different exporting countries varies and that it, therefore, made no sense to have a blanket restriction on class A seed in place in Egypt.

Split grading

Scottish growers have indicated that the requirement to split grade consignments for Egypt has caused major practical problems. This was pointed out to the visitors but Dr Soliman indicated that this requirement had been agreed with the importers in Egypt.

Soil

During the visits to different farms (see below), Dr Soliman and Prof. Sherif expressed some concern regarding the amount of soil present on the tuber samples shown to them. It was pointed out to them that there is no tolerance for soil in the current Egyptian decree which Dr Soliman said had been an oversight.

Future of potato production in Egypt

Dr Soliman explained that the Egyptian Government has plans to extensively expand the ware potato cultivation area in Egypt. He quoted a five-fold rise in the current area over the next 10 years. He confirmed that most of the seed needed for this expansion would have to be imported. The main limiting factor for expansion would be the availability of water.

Seed Potato Industry – 22 & 23 November 2007

On the second and third day of the programme, the Egyptian delegates visited five industry locations and met with representatives of the trade. They were accompanied on their tour by Mr Mark Prentice (BPC) and Dr Pieter van de Graaf (SASA).

The officials were shown how different parts of the Scottish seed industry meet the requirements of the SPCS and Egypt. They were informed how microplant and minituber production is conducted by officially approved companies during a visit to GenTech Propagation Ltd in Dundee.

They visited two stores of growers supplying IPM Ltd, where they were met by Mr Graham Kerr of SGRPID Central Area Office, and one store of a grower for Caithness Potatoes Ltd. A demonstration of an inspection was carried out at one of the stores.

Conclusions & Implications

The inward seed potato mission from Egypt was the first step in developing relationships between the Scottish and Egyptian governments in this area. The Inward Mission underlined to the Egyptian officials how the phytosanitary status of Scottish seed is strictly controlled. The Egyptian delegation made clear that there have been very few phytosanitary problems with Scottish seed potato exports to Egypt, but personal contact with the Head of the Central Administration of Plant Quarantine in Egypt means that, if any future problems with Scottish consignments occur in Egypt, there is a clear point of contact for dispute resolution.

Because of its plans for expansion of the ware potato production, Egypt will rely, even more than is already the case, on the import of high quality seed potatoes. This creates a great opportunity for Scotland and will hopefully mean a continued increase in Scottish seed exports to Egypt. The visiting Egyptian officials indicated their willingness to be open to negotiation regarding the import conditions for next season, and showed an interest in both receiving a mission from Scotland in Egypt and in returning to Scotland during the 2008 growing season.

If Egypt acts on the interest expressed in involvement in the UNECE working group on seed potatoes, this would also be an important break-through. Egypt would be the first North African country to be part of this group and its participation would possibly help to negotiate more relaxed tolerances for surface diseases in future Ministerial Decrees.

As a result of the Inward Mission, it is proposed that exporters to Egypt will be consulted on an Outward Mission from Scotland to Egypt be organised in the spring of 2008, followed, if possible, by a second Inward Mission involving more Egyptian officials.

If you would like to discuss this mission from Egypt please contact:

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