



Report on the Inward Mission from Egypt on Scottish Seed Potatoes 28 July – 1 August 2008

Executive Summary

Egypt imports more than a third of all UK seed potatoes exported outside the EU. A high level inward mission from this important market was organised by the Potato Council and the Scottish Government in July/August 2008 as part of the continued dialogue with the Egyptian government on seed potatoes. This recent mission, headed by Dr Safwat El Haddad, First Secretary for Agriculture in Egypt, was timed to allow the visitors to see crops in the field and meet with British exporters.

The mission comprised of a visit to SASA headquarters in Edinburgh with discussions with representatives of the Scottish Government, Defra and the Potato Council, followed by calls at several seed potato businesses around Scotland. The visit was an important opportunity for the trade to discuss production and supply issues with the key Egyptian policy maker on potatoes.

The mission was overall a very helpful and positive continuation of the discussions with Egypt. It also provided an opportunity to clarify important issues such as the short number of generations used in the UK and the single directional flow of seed potatoes through the British classification schemes. Opportunities for further official co-operation in several areas were discussed. These included:

- Official pre-export inspection of seed potatoes in Scotland by Egyptian inspectors
- Inclusion of field generation markers on the label
- Relaxation of certain Egyptian import conditions (specifically those for powdery scab and spraing) in conjunction with collaborative research on the pathogens concerned

More detailed proposals on the above issues are now expected in the near future after discussion by the Egyptian Seed Committee.

Purpose & Objectives

The overall aim of the inward/outward meetings with Egypt is to improve contacts with Egyptian officials, to discuss revision of the Egyptian import conditions for seed potatoes, and to inform Egyptian decision makers, in person, about seed potato classification, inspection and phytosanitary control in the UK.

The purpose of this particular inward mission was to give Dr Safwat El Haddad, the First Secretary for Agriculture in Egypt, an opportunity to meet Scottish Government and Defra officials and members of the seed potato trade involved in export to Egypt, and to show him personally the Scottish production system and associated official controls.

Background

Egypt is currently the biggest potato producing country in Africa since its potato production has expanded rapidly over the last ten years. Annual potato production in Egypt is 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 (referred to as the “new land”).

Brown rot is a quarantine disease in the EU and findings of this disease in imported Egyptian ware has long been one of the major obstacles to increasing export of Egyptian ware potatoes to the EU. Strict government controls have been put in place in Egypt with EU assistance to ensure the potato production chain remains free from the brown rot causing pathogen *Ralstonia solanacearum*. As a result, there were no findings of brown rot in ware potato imports from Egypt to the EU during the 2007/08 season.

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. Last season, Egypt imported 70,000 t of seed potatoes, of which more than 30% was Scottish.

In view of the experience with brown rot, the Egyptian government is understandably cautious regarding the import of seed infected with organisms with which Egypt has limited experience. This means that some import tolerances applied by Egypt are very restrictive. The Egyptian phytosanitary import tolerances for seed potatoes are laid down by Ministerial Decree. The Minister is advised on the tolerances by the Egyptian Seed Committee which consists of government officials as well as members of the trade in Egypt. There is a scientific sub-committee which provides advice on technical issues.

In 2007, a Decree was issued which contained tolerances which were generally more lenient than the previous decree from 2006 (which was not implemented because it was excessively strict). However, the Egyptian standards for surface diseases are still considerably tighter than the Scottish minimum export tolerances or the UNECE standard.

Commercial representatives from Egyptian importers have been visiting Scottish farms to inspect lots before export for many years. For the past two seasons, the majority of Scottish consignments for Egypt were 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.

Since the first inward mission from Egypt to the UK in November 2007, there has been a continuous dialogue on different seed potato issues between Scotland and Egypt. Discussions have intensified since an official visit by SASA and the Potato Council to Cairo in April 2008.

On several previous occasions, the key policy maker on potatoes in Egypt, Dr Safwat El Haddad, the First Secretary for Agriculture and Director of the Potato Brown Rot Project, had been unable to accept an invitation to join a seed potato mission to Scotland. The invitation was repeated this summer and Dr Safwat has now been the most senior official ever to take part in such a mission. He was accompanied by Eng. Saad Abdou Saad Sidhom, head of the Plant Quarantine Office in Alexandria port, who stepped in for Dr Saad Nassar, Chair of the Seed Committee, who was unable to travel to the UK.

Egyptian Inward Mission Delegation members

Dr Safwat El Haddad, First Secretary for Agriculture and Director of the Potato Brown Rot Project, Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Giza

Eng. Saad Abdou Saad Sidhom, Head of the Plant Quarantine Office, Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Alexandria

Summary of visits

Dr John Kerr, Head of Potato Section, SASA, and Mr Mark Prentice, Seed and Export Manager, Potato Council, accompanied the Egyptian delegation throughout their visit.

Scottish Government – SASA - 28 July 2008

Upon arrival at the headquarters of the Scottish Government's SASA Division, Dr Safwat was welcomed to the UK by senior officials from the Scottish Government (SG) and Defra:

- Mr David Henderson-Howat, Head of Agriculture and Rural Development Division, SG
- Mr Andy Robb, Head of Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate (RPID), SG
- Dr Kevin O'Donnell, Deputy Head of SASA Division, SG
- Mr Brian Ellam, Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate, Defra

In addition, the visit and associated discussions on the first day were attended by the following SG officials:

- Dr Pieter van de Graaf, Export Liaison Officer, SASA
- Mr Duncan MacRae, Regional Delivery Division (inspectorate),
- Mr John Speirs, Agricultural Commodities Branch (policy)

Eng. Abdou Saad joined the visit to SASA later in the day.

Dr Safwat attended several seminars:

- An introduction to SASA (Dr Kevin O'Donnell)
- An introduction to the Potato Council and the British potato industry (Mr Mark Prentice)
- Scottish seed potato classification and inspection (Dr John Kerr)
- UNECE international standard for seed potatoes (Dr Stuart Carnegie)
- Brown rot testing and research in Scotland (Dr Pieter van de Graaf)

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

He was also given a tour of SASA's facilities including the Nuclear Stock Initiation Unit (Ms Sandra Goodfellow), the Virology Laboratory (Mr Adrian Fox) and the Entomology Laboratory (Mrs Fiona Highet).



During the time reserved for discussions, Dr Safwat outlined the strategy Egypt has set out for potato production. He indicated that Egypt plans to increase domestic potato production to around four times the current size. To enable this, he envisaged a need for a greater volume of imported seed which would include Scottish supplies. He mentioned that up to 300,000 t of input seed might be required in future.

Dr Safwat went on to describe some minor problems encountered with imported seed over the last few seasons. He asked about the number of generations permitted in Scottish seed and whether this could be placed on the official label. The Scottish SPCS rules regarding generations and labelling were explained to him.

Dr Safwat expressed the desire for all potato issues between Egypt and the UK to be discussed in one forum, by which he meant both seed and ware (export and import) trade issues. Mr Speirs explained that, as the principle seed potato producing region in the UK, Scotland traditionally takes the lead on issues regarding the certification and inspection of seed lots for export to Egypt. However, Egyptian ware imports are normally dealt with by Defra as the central UK plant health authority and because, at present, for commercial reasons, all ware from Egypt to the UK is imported via ports in England. Mr Speirs indicated, however, that there is no legislative barrier to prevent Egyptian ware potatoes being imported directly into Scotland.

Dr Safwat was keen to discuss possible relaxation of the requirements placed on Egyptian imports into the UK (as well as the EU in general) in relation to brown rot. Mr Ellam explained that the hard work done by Egypt in addressing the problems with brown rot has been appreciated by both the EU and UK. He commented that 2007/08 had been the first season in which there were no interceptions by the EU due to the disease. Mr Ellam indicated that maintenance of freedom from brown rot in Egyptian ware exports for a few

more seasons would provide strong evidence to the EU Standing Committee on Plant Health to review the additional requirements imposed on Egypt.

Dr Safwat also mentioned the possibility of an arrangement for pre-export inspections in the country of origin, i.e. Egyptian inspectors checking seed in Scotland prior to shipping and likewise UK inspectors inspecting ware in Egypt before despatch.

Seed Potato Industry - 29 & 30 July 2008

On the second and third day of the programme the Egyptian delegates visited GenTech Propagation Ltd, IPM Ltd, Greenvale AP Ltd and Caithness Potatoes Ltd and met with representatives of the trade. They were accompanied by Dr Kerr (SASA) and Mr Prentice (Potato Council). The delegation also visited the produce section of a Tesco supermarket to view how potatoes are marketed to British consumers.

The officials were shown:

- Microplant and minituber production in Scotland
- Pre-basic seed production
- Commercial seed production destined for Egypt
- Variety trials
- Examples of storage and infrastructure typical for Great Britain.



Dr Safwat and Eng. Abdou Saad were able to see how these different parts of the Scottish seed potato production system met the requirements of the Scottish SPCS and of the Egyptian government.

An industry dinner was hosted near Perth and was attended by ten seed potato trade representatives active in Egypt.

The following issues were raised by the trade and/or the Egyptian officials over the two days:

- Dr Safwat asked about the number of field generations of Scottish seed potatoes.
- Egypt's tight import standards were regularly discussed, particularly the low tolerances applied for powdery scab and spraing.
- Split grading for Egypt was mentioned by some exporters.
- Dr Safwat raised the subject of moving the Egyptian pre-export inspections onto a more official footing.
- Exporters requested that whenever problems arise in Egypt it would be helpful if they could be resolved more quickly as delays inevitably lead to depreciation in the quality of the tubers in question.
- Exporters sought confirmation on the container sizes allowed by Egypt.

See below for more detailed discussion of these points.

Overall, Dr Safwat was impressed with the level of commitment to seed potato production shown by the trade representatives he spoke to. He was also complementary about the quality of Scottish seed in general and made reference many times to his aim to increase the volume of seed imported from Scotland.

Scottish Government - SASA - 31 July 2008

A final meeting was held at SASA headquarters to discuss the issues that had arisen during the mission. This was attended by the two Egyptian visitors and Dr Kevin O'Donnell, Mr John Speirs, Dr John Kerr and Mr Mark Prentice. Dr Safwat reiterated that it was Egypt's intention to significantly increase the area of potatoes grown in Egypt both for the domestic and export ware markets. He also indicated that he hoped that the tonnage of Scottish seed potatoes sent to Egypt could be increased to provide the input seed required to achieve this expansion.

Several specific issues were discussed:

Pre-export inspections

Dr Safwat described his proposals for a mutual protocol between Egypt and the UK/Scotland for pre-export inspections. This would cover inspection by UK officials of Egyptian ware prior to despatch to the UK and similarly Egyptian officials inspecting UK (Scottish) seed before shipping to Egypt. The final inspection would remain at the port of entry but in practice this would simply be a random check of a limited sample of the imports. Scottish Government officials indicated that on the import side this was a matter for the UK Government and as such they could not negotiate on that point. Dr Safwat indicated that, in that case, a tripartite negotiation would be useful (Egypt, Defra and SG).

In the meantime, Dr Safwat proposed that, for potato exports to Egypt for the coming inspection season, the Scottish Government, rather than commercial companies, should co-ordinate the inspections conducted by Egyptian officials in Scotland. The arrangement should be offered to all companies with an interest in participating but would not be considered compulsory by Egypt.

Tolerances and research proposal

During the visit, Dr Safwat indicated that he was willing to consider a relaxation in the powdery scab and spraing tolerances. However, this relaxation would only be permitted in order to allow the causal organisms to be studied under Egyptian conditions. Dr Safwat undertook to send the Scottish Government a research proposal for the study of several diseases of concern to the Egyptian authorities. These diseases are powdery scab, common scab, silver scurf, black scurf, and spraing (PMTV and TRV). If the Scottish Government would be able to contribute to this study, Dr Safwat indicated it could be possible to relax the powdery scab tolerance to the UNECE level (up to 3% of countable tubers are permitted and tubers are countable when 10% or more of the surface area is affected). He also indicated that a similar relaxation might be possible for spraing.

Dr Kerr noted that there was no specific UNECE, EU or Scottish tolerance for spraing but that the tolerance for "External defects" could be a level for assessment of spraing. This

tolerance is set at 3% in the UNECE standard, 3% in the relevant EU directive and 2% in the Scottish SPCS, respectively. Dr O'Donnell indicated that the SG would be willing to consider the research proposal and was looking forward to receiving it.

Split grading

During the mission a number of British exporters raised the issue of the compulsory split at 55 mm in the 2007 Egyptian decree and asked for some flexibility in the size banding in future decrees. However, other exporters indicated that the split was not a critical issue. Dr Safwat made it clear that it was necessary to protect Egyptian growers from receiving consignments with only the largest potatoes present in the bag. He was reluctant to introduce any relaxation that would take away this protection. He mentioned three possibilities:

- Retain the status quo i.e. a split of 28 x 55 and 55 x 65 mm.
- Allow 28 x 65 mm but require that the tuber number in the bag is not less than a given number and that this number be printed on the label.
- No size limit but if the > 60 mm fraction exceeded 20% this would lead to rejection of the entire consignment.

Dr Kerr pointed out the advantages of the Scottish domestic size requirements (as defined in the EU legislation) i.e. no upper size limit but all tubers must be within a 25 mm size difference with a natural distribution.

As no consensus could immediately be found, it was agreed to retain the status quo for now and keep this requirement under review.

Container Size

Some members of the trade had raised the issue of container size, in particular the fact that 50 kg bags are now considered a manual handling risk under UK Health and Safety law. Dr Safwat reassured Scottish trade that the container size was no longer stipulated in the 2007 Egyptian decree, and that any container size was allowed provided the correct weight was given on the official label.

Field Generation Number

Dr Safwat was interested to note that the Scottish Government had created the possibility for the field generation number to be voluntarily stated on the official label and that some companies were including this information as standard practice for lots marketed to Egypt. He explained that he had been informed previously by other countries that Scottish seed potatoes were typically 10 field generations old. SASA and various trade representatives were able to explain that in practice almost all Scottish seed potatoes are far younger than 10 field generations, and that short field generations are actually a significant benefit of Scottish seed potatoes. He indicated that he would be considering making FG labelling a requirement in the next Egyptian decree (i.e. compulsory for all imports of seed potatoes into Egypt).

Other issues

Dr Safwat indicated that Egypt may be interested in participating in an EU twinning project on potato production. Dr Kerr informed Dr Safwat that SASA had participated in other twinning projects and is therefore well versed in how to respond to such a request.

Dr Safwat mentioned the possibility of introducing starch potato production in Egypt.

Dr Safwat said he would report his findings to the Egyptian Seed Committee in early August. The recommendations from this meeting should then enable him to put forward some firm proposals to the Scottish Government on the various issues discussed.

Conclusions and Implications

The mission was a very useful continuation of the dialogue with Egypt and positive signals were given by Egypt regarding the relaxation of some of the stricter disease tolerances applied to imported seed potatoes.

Dr Safwat repeated Egypt's intention, also expressed during previous missions, to significantly increase the area of potatoes grown in Egypt. It is clear that in order to secure an increased tonnage of seed potatoes for import to enable this expansion, Egypt will have to reconsider its strict import tolerances and ensure that, in future, these will all be based on scientific evidence. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Egypt is coupling progress on relaxation of these tolerances to the commencement of joint research work on the organisms concerned between Scotland and Egypt.

Follow up of the proposals raised from this mission will be the key to success of future exports to Egypt. The Scottish Government would be keen to take up this opportunity for further co-operation but the level and source of funding would need careful consideration by individual companies, the Scottish Government and the Potato Council once the proposal is received.

If progress is made on research co-operation and the associated relaxation of the import conditions, there will be great opportunities for increased trade in seed potatoes with Egypt. The level of increase will obviously depend on the rise in local consumption and Egyptian ware exports. The future of the latter also seems brighter now that Egypt appears to have made real progress in controlling the problem of brown rot.

Dr Safwat was grateful for the input from the British trade and took on board the comments put to him. His proposal to expand the pre-export inspections of seed potatoes in Scotland by Egyptian inspectors to any exporting company interested and transfer co-ordination to the Scottish Government will be awaited for further discussion.

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

Mark Prentice, Potato Council, tel. 0131 472 4149 or
Pieter van de Graaf, SG-SASA, tel. 0131 244 6354