



# Report on the Outward Mission to Morocco on Seed Potato Exports 16-18 February 2010

## Organisations visited

- British Consulate General, Casablanca
- Ministry of Agriculture, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Control Department, Casablanca Port (Direction du Contrôle et de la Qualité aux Postes Frontières de la Wilaya du Grand Casablanca)
- Ministry of Agriculture, Office National De Sécurité Sanitaire Des Produits Alimentaires (ONSSA)  
(Ex Division de la Protection Végétal, des Contrôles Techniques et de la Répression des Fraudes (DPVCTRF))
- Ministry of Agriculture, Direction Du Développement Des Filières De Production (DDFP)  
(also ex Division de la Protection Végétal, des Contrôles Techniques et de la Répression des Fraudes (DPVCTRF))
- Société Nationale de Commercialisation de Semences (SONACOS)
- Casem, Marosem and Dynagri, Private Company Seed Potato Importers.

## Executive Summary

An outward mission to Morocco was undertaken by Pieter van de Graaf (SASA) and Mark Prentice (Potato Council). This mission had been planned as part of the ongoing seed export strategy to develop official relationships between the Scottish seed industry and its major export countries. This will help Scotland to understand how policy affecting phytosanitary import conditions is being developed, and hopefully enable Scotland to influence changes before they were enacted in legislation. Promotion of the Scottish seed industry was also an objective. However, the mission took place in the midst of major rejections in Morocco of European seed potatoes, including some from Scotland. Given the severity of the rejections, this issue dominated discussions with Government officials. Meetings at the Port of Casablanca and with a selection of private importing companies were held on the first day to help develop an understanding of the issues, before meetings with the policy officials in charge on import conditions in Rabat on the second day. Planned field trips for the final day were cancelled, with the day being spent back at Casablanca Port, where



inspections of Scottish seed potatoes were being carried out. Subsequent to the visit, the EU Commission has established an “Expert Working Group”; this group aims to present scientific information collectively to Morocco and achieve changes to its import conditions for seed potatoes, in an attempt to resolve the situation by the end of the summer 2010. Scotland, which has been in close liaison with the other UK-devolved administrations on this issue, will be represented on the working group organised by the Commission. Further information will be available as the working group is set up in April.

## **Purpose & Objectives**

The original purpose of the mission was to improve contacts with the Moroccan plant health officials, in particular those involved with import inspections, and to inform Moroccan officials about classification, inspection and health of seed potatoes in Scotland. This was superseded by the developing issue of rejections of seed potatoes from Scotland and other EU countries. There was a need to try and clarify why seed potatoes were being rejected and to understand the validity of these rejections. Some Scottish seed potatoes had already been rejected, whereas others were due for imminent arrival.

## **Background**

By volume, Morocco is Scotland’s second biggest export market for seed potatoes (after Egypt). However, the volume of trade with Morocco is heavily dependent on price, resulting in fluctuating export volumes of 9,000 to 16,000 tonnes per year. This situation is caused by the fact that around 95% of Scottish seed exported to Morocco is of a single variety, Desiree, which is not protected by breeder’s rights. On average, about two-thirds of all Desiree seed produced in Scotland is exported to Morocco. The situation is complicated by the existence of both a state seed company, SONACOS and a private sector of importing companies. Historically, SONACOS has set the price for seed potato imports into Morocco, with the private sector following. However, the private sector appears to be increasingly involved in determining the price of seed imports, and looking at newer varieties. The majority of imported seed is used for the production of ware potatoes. Yield of potato crops in Morocco is highly dependent on rainfall and, therefore, is very variable from year to year. Cultivation takes place throughout the year.

## **Rejections**

Morocco rejected approximately 5k–6k tonnes of EU seed potatoes, including 1100 tonnes from Northern Ireland, 2500 tonnes from The Netherlands, 500 tonnes from Belgium and 1200 tonnes from Scotland. Historically, official rejections from Morocco have been extremely rare. However, during this season, it has become apparent that the notification of official rejections by Morocco is very poor. The usual official notification procedure between the phytosanitary authorities of the exporting and importing countries has not



been adhered to by Morocco in these recent rejections, despite repeated requests from Scotland. This makes collating data difficult.

The Moroccan import conditions were last amended in 1985 and have remained unchanged. It appears that enforcement changed this year, around the middle of January. Reasons behind this are unclear, although various theories were discussed, including a change in the Government structure, or a possible poor quality shipment from another country resulting in the Moroccan authorities washing the samples of seed potatoes for inspection. It is also possible that this could be a consequence of the rejection of Moroccan produce by the EU. This is all subject to speculation, with no clear indication of the definitive reason. It is clear that there were no rejections of shipments from Scotland that arrived before the middle of January.

## **Summary of visits**

### **Casablanca – Port (Day 1)**

#### **Ministry of Agriculture, Direction du Contrôle et de la Qualité aux Postes Frontières de la Wilaya du Grand Casablanca**

**Present: Dr Saïd Id Boubrik (Director) and Mr Salah Ritoune (Head of Plant Protection)**

The Ministry of Agriculture officials at the ports are responsible for inspections and sampling in relation to seed potato phytosanitary import conditions. The inspection of imported seed potatoes consists of three steps:

- documentation (phytosanitary certificate, invoice, etc.)
- identity (verification of labels, etc.)
- physical inspection (visual inspection for diseases and disorders, sampling for testing)

If consignments are sent by vessel, they are unloaded in to warehouses on the quay. No movement can take place until they have been officially inspected and cleared.

There are two official inspection procedures:

- All lots are sampled for quarantine organisms at a rate of 200 tubers per crop number. Soil is also collected for PCN testing.



- A second qualitative inspection takes place on 5 bags (250kgs) per crop number. All sampled potatoes were washed before assessment. One bag per crop number is inspected for the whole consignment. If the potatoes in the first bag comply with the phytosanitary conditions, that crop number in the consignment is then passed. If the first sample is over tolerance, the inspection proceeds to the second bag, where an average across the two bags is used. The crop can pass or move to the third bag, where the average across the three bags is used, etc, until all five bags have been inspected. If, after five bags, the crop does not meet the phytosanitary conditions, that crop number is rejected. However, if the rejection is for rots, up to a further 5 bags (10 in total) can be inspected.



Seed being washed and assessed

It appeared that the Moroccans were inspecting for two key issues – Scab (Common Scab and Silver Scurf – called Silver Scab in Morocco) and Rots (all rots). In practice, it appeared that Moroccan powdery scab tolerance (0%), applies only to cankers, with lesions counted in the “Scab” tolerance as Common Scab\*\*. The tolerances quoted for both were as per the Moroccan conditions, which haven’t changed since 1985:

- Scab (defined as Common and Silver) – 5% by weight\* may have greater than 33% surface area.
- Rots – 2% by weight.

\* It was explained that, for consignments with 0-2% by weight of scab, the seed is passed for sale. For seed potatoes with 2-5% scab, the labels have to be removed and the seed marketed as non-certified seed. Both tolerances are incredibly strict, especially when Silver Scurf is counted as part of this.

\*\* There is a risk that powdery scab lesions start to be differentiated and count towards the zero tolerance, particularly with the washing of samples.

Inspections seen on the first day appeared to be fair with upwards of 7% by weight being countable for “Scab” rather than just 5%. All stocks appeared within the Scottish Minimum Export Tolerance for Common Scab (1.5% by weight may have greater than 12.5% surface area). However, the severity of silver scurf was greater than the “Scab” tolerance.

Dr Id Boubrik and his officials at the Port went to great length to demonstrate their fairness, and the fact that they had to implement the regulations set out by the Ministry staff, who are in charge of policy in Rabat. Dr Id Boubrik indicated that he would be happy to implement more lenient tolerances, if they are changed by Rabat.



The whole inspection process can take up to 11-12 days from arrival of the consignment to passing or being rejected (where the full quota of bags are inspected).

When challenged on the washing of all samples, Dr Id Boubrik indicated that they only wash samples where they were concerned about quality, and unable to see defects. He highlighted that the rejections justified the need to wash everything at the moment, and he questioned quality this season in Europe. He claimed that nothing had changed in the amount of washing taking place. This approach would appear inconsistent with the historic lack of rejections by Morocco.

### **Meetings with Private Importing Companies**

Meetings were conducted with representatives of the private sector in Morocco. This was to establish their thoughts on the rejections being suffered by EU countries. Unfortunately none were able to clearly identify why this was happening. Several reasons were mentioned including:

- It was explained that there was a new structure in the Ministry of Agriculture. A new department (ONSSA) was now responsible for all agricultural production, including phytosanitary import conditions. This change of structure and personnel may be more inclined to implement the regulations and encourage more robust inspections and enforcement.
- A poor quality consignment of seed potatoes may have been sent from the EU in January. This may have encouraged a more robust inspection process and a more rigorous implementation of the rules.
- That rejections by the EU for Moroccan produce (tomatoes were mentioned) could be influencing a stricter implementation of the rules.

All the companies explained that this was costing both their companies and the Moroccan farmers considerable money. Seed prices had risen by as much as 60% to the Moroccan farmer, and there would be a shortage of potatoes to sell next year.

The companies also explained that they would be carrying out silver scurf trials in the spring planted crop to collect data to demonstrate to the Moroccan government that the silver scurf tolerance should be relaxed.

Harmonisation to the UNECE standards for seed potatoes was discussed as an appropriate basis to ensure quality requirements for Morocco. This would bring Moroccan import standards in line with EU standards. It was agreed that this was a sensible objective.

One of the representatives mentioned that *Dickeya* may be an increasing problem in Morocco. This was an unprompted comment by them, when blackleg was being discussed as an increasing problem in Moroccan potato crops. This demonstrated that knowledge of



this disease under warm conditions is understood in Morocco. It was also claimed that research is being carried out in this area, although no details were given. The new measures being implemented in Scotland to protect against *Dickeya* were highlighted.

## **Rabat**

### **Ministry of Agriculture, Office National De Securite Sanitaire Des Produits Alimentaires (ONNSA)**

#### **Present: Mr Hamid Benazzou (General Manager) and Mr M Tahiri (Responsible for Certification Semences & Plants)**

ONNSA are the key policy makers in Morocco that determine import conditions, and make the policy decisions relating to imports. This includes any appeals against rejection. A meeting was held with ONNSA to discuss rejected consignments, consignments still in transit and Morocco's seed potato import conditions, particularly for silver scurf.

On arrival, the Moroccan officials stated how unhappy they had been with previous delegations from EU countries criticising them and their methods. A strict time limit was also placed on the meeting.

It was explained to ONNSA how damaging the strict 'Scab' tolerance will be for Moroccan growers, Scottish growers and the importers and exporters. It was also explained that these rejections will lead to a shortage of potatoes, which could increase prices. It was also likely that seed prices from the EU would probably rise, if supplied at all. It was also explained that Dr van de Graaf and Mr Prentice sought a pragmatic solution for both countries.

ONNSA officials stated that they had not changed any tolerances since 1985 and were adamant that the quality from the EU must have slipped. They refused to review the tolerances for the remainder of the 2010 import season. They were at pains to point out that it would be unfair for them to inspect Scottish seed potatoes any differently than seed potatoes from other countries like The Netherlands and Northern Ireland. They did indicate that they were happy to review requirements for silver scurf and any other tolerance for future seasons and, with scientific evidence, they would be prepared to make changes.

ONNSA also refused entry into Morocco for rejected seed potatoes for any purpose, including disposal. They claimed that non-entry had been enforced against earlier rejections from other countries and again, any change would have been unfair.

During discussions, it was suggested that if Morocco was unable to review and change tolerances, maybe they could consider a slight change in interpretation. The suggestion put forward was that the Moroccan conditions state [5% by weight of tubers over an area greater than 1/3, by Common Scab OR Silver Scurf]. It was explained that this should be



interpreted as 5% by weight for common scab and 5% by weight for silver scurf, treating each disease separately. Tubers would not be countable if neither of these faults exceeded 1/3<sup>rd</sup> surface area coverage on its own. This suggestion was refused for seed potatoes already inspected, with no judgement given on consignments still to arrive. The issue was left open for them to consider, in the hope that, by not pushing for acknowledgement of a concession, they may be inclined to consider it.

It was agreed that SASA would prepare a scientific review of silver scurf and send it to Morocco for their consideration as part of their own review for future seasons. [Note: The EU are setting up an "Expert Working Group" to agree with ONSSA suitable import conditions for future seasons. SASA will participate in this, with scientific information on silver scurf being pooled together and presented].

#### **Ministry of Agriculture, Direction Du Developement Des Filières De Production (DDFP)**

**Present: Mr Ahmed Bentouhami (Manager) Mr Allal Chibane (Head of Service)**

A visit was paid to the DDFP which, like ONSSA, used to be part of the old DPVCTRF. Unlike ONSSA, they have no direct impact on seed potato import conditions. DDFP are responsible for promotion of knowledge to the Moroccan agricultural sector. This includes the advisory side of the "Green Maroc" initiative, which aims to improve Morocco's food security. DDFP acknowledged that issues being seen on seed potato imports would have an impact of Moroccan farmers, and their ability to supply ware potatoes. Tuber Moth was the biggest pest or disease faced by Moroccan farmers. It was commented that silver scurf was far less of an issue. The final decision on import regulations rest with ONSSA, but DDFP agreed to feed in the issues discussed.

DDFP explained potatoes were a crop in which Government were trying to encourage increased production. They explained that they were involved in funding several research projects in areas of storage, grading, mechanisation and irrigation. Variety development was also being considered, with DDFP keen to see new varieties introduced to replace Desiree. It was explained that National Listing of new varieties is a two year process.

#### **Société Nationale de Commercialisation de Semences (SONACOS)**

**Present: Mohammed Karim Rharrit (President) Driss Benzarouel (Director)**

During the trip to Rabat, a visit to meet the new Director of SONACOS was undertaken. Mr Rharrit was briefed on the classification, inspection and health of Scottish seed potatoes and the activities of the Potato Council. It was clear that SONACOS had also suffered significant rejections earlier in the season. Silver scurf was the main problem, followed by rots.



Mr Rharrit explained that SONACOS would be discussing revisions to the silver scurf tolerance for future import seasons with ONSSA. The potential implications for future supply were discussed with the possibility of reduced supply and certainly price rises as a result of this. This was taken on board by SONACOS.

Mr Rharrit requested that Scottish companies consider new varieties in Morocco and that he was keen to look at new varieties to replace Desiree. He hoped that, once this issue had been resolved, Scottish companies would embrace this.

### **Casablanca – Port (Day 3)**

Proposed field visits were cancelled to enable further viewing of inspections being carried out on Scottish seed potatoes. A return trip to the Port at Casablanca was made. Mr Salah Ritoune (Head of Plant Protection), present on Day 1, was again keen to demonstrate his staff inspecting Scottish seed potatoes. The same sampling procedure was being followed that was seen on Day 1, with all samples washed before inspection. Mr Ritoune indicated that ONSSA had been in contact from Rabat about inspections. Although Mr Ritoune would not confirm, it was clear that tubers with silver scurf were being separated from those with common scab, indicating that the proposal left with ONSSA the previous day to allow up to 5% by weight for each disease, had been taken on board. Although this was a concession and undoubtedly helpful, the severity of silver scurf on tubers and low amounts of common scab meant that, in practice, this had minimal effect on classification of countable tubers. Mr Ritoune was also again keen to demonstrate how they were not strictly enforcing 5% by weight, but were being flexible. It was clear that this was consistent with the first day, with a relatively liberal approach being taken. The issue still remained that the silver scurf tolerance was very strict, which was made worse by washing all samples.

### **Conclusions & Implications**

The outward mission to Morocco had originally been planned to develop what is an important market for Scottish seed potatoes. However, these events were superseded by the serious nature of rejections of several thousand tonnes of EU seed potatoes.

Undoubtedly, without changes to the import conditions, particularly silver scurf, it will be very difficult to supply the market, particularly at the traditionally low prices that Morocco expects.

It would appear that something happened during the import season to result in a change in approach from Morocco. This was not acknowledged by the Moroccans. Clearly, earlier individual EU country delegations had upset the Moroccans, particularly ONSSA.

Whilst the Moroccan inspections were quite liberal in counting faults at inspection, the main issue is the strict tolerance. Although there are benefits of consignments being



inspected one bag at a time (some material will pass after just one or two bags being inspected), it does prolong the inspections for the potatoes where more bags need to be sampled. This will only increase the chance of rejections for progressive diseases like rots and silver scurf. It will also reduce the quality of the seed to the farmer. As a consequence, it is a concern that potatoes may sit in warehouses for more than 10 days after arrival.

Fortunately, Morocco appeared to be quite open to develop the review of their tolerances for future years. This whole situation has undoubtedly resulted in a huge increase in work, both physically and politically for Morocco. Hopefully this will help achieve some resolution. The setting up by the EU Commission of an “Expert Working Group” to liaise directly with Morocco to review their tolerances is pleasing to see. Ensuring Morocco adopts international protocols regarding informing the exporting country officially of a rejection should also feature in discussions. It is also very helpful that SASA will be taking an active role in this group. It will be important for the Scottish export sector to be aware of the ongoing activity of this group, but to also consider what action can be taken independently by Scotland.

**As a result of the mission, the next steps would appear to be:**

**SASA/Scottish Government should:**

- Seek full details of rejected stocks (by crop number) from Casablanca Port. Feed this information back to each appropriate exporter. Also request that in the event of future rejections, official notification should be received by SASA at the earliest opportunity.
- Take an active role in the EU Expert Working Group to resolve the Moroccan import conditions.
- Prepare a scientific review of Silver Scurf and either feed in through the EU Working Group or direct to Morocco, or both as appropriate.
- Discuss future season requirements with exporters as the situation develops.

**Scottish exporters and growers should:**

- Review all measures to help reduce the threat of silver scurf (and rots) including transport arrangements and shipping dates to Morocco to ensure seed consignments arrive in the best condition possible.
- Liaise with importers who are carrying out Silver Scurf trials in Morocco. Pass on any information to SASA or PCL so that it can help steer discussions with Moroccan officials.



**The Potato Council should:**

- Discuss the findings and possible future outcomes with Scottish exporters, growers and SASA.
- Notwithstanding the EU Working Group, discuss with exporters and SASA the possibility of an inward mission to Scotland by Moroccan plant health officials.

**If you would like to discuss this mission to Morocco please contact:**

Mark Prentice, Potato Council, tel. 0131 472 4149

For information on the EU working group contact:  
John Kerr, SASA, 0131 244 8945