

Plant Health and the Single European Market

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In 1985 the European Community Governments agreed to establish a single market, which meant abolishing restrictions on trade between the member states. This went far beyond the removal of certain customs duties and non-tariff barriers to trade which resulted when the common market was first created. The idea was that in future there would be no greater restraint on trade between the UK and France than between Kent and Sussex (for example). The term normally used to describe this idea is free circulation.

The consequences of this decision, now on the way to implementation, are that by 31 December 1992 (the date set in the Single Market Act) there will be a slackening of frontier controls at any border between two member states. The Customs Entry form, a document which has always represented the focus of control and monitoring of goods entering the UK will disappear completely for imports—and this of course includes plants and plant propagating material—from other member states. However as far as plant health controls are concerned it may be necessary for there to be interim arrangements until the new system of production measures is in place. Imports from countries outside the EC will continue to be subject to the present system of control, i.e. the requirement for most plant material to be accompanied by a fully authenticated phytosanitary (health) certificate issued in the country of origin. But for trade within the EC, a whole range of functions for which the Customs Entry provided a basis including the checking of phytosanitary certificates accompanying planting material will disappear in 1993 or soon after.

The main basis of the Commission's new system for plant health is a community-wide scheme for certifying production of all plant propagating material and certain other plant products for distribution either within or between member states.

If places of production, i.e. nurseries, meet Community plant health standards then a "plant passport" will be issued to allow free movement anywhere in the Community. This is in effect a system of plant health control at places of production of propagating material, i.e. propagating nurseries and certain other production premises. Once the "plant passport" has been issued the material will cross community country boundaries without further checking or inspection of the material at points of entry into those countries. Currently, of course, community countries have the powers, through their individual plant health services, to stop consignments of planting material at points of entry such as ports and airports to check phytosanitary certificates and, if necessary, inspect the plants for freedom from quarantine pests and diseases.

There will also be, after 1 January 1993, provision for the designation of "isolated zones" within the Community which are free of harmful organisms present elsewhere in the Community. However there will also be provision for the designation of "ecological regions" which for underlying reasons such as climate or cropping have plant health concerns which do not affect the rest of the Community—for example citrus production in Spain and other Southern European countries.

Material entering these zones or regions would have to have a passport which indicates that it meets the unique plant health status of the region of zone. For example we may wish that, as the UK is free of Colorado beetle and is therefore an "isolated zone" as far as this pest is concerned the plant passports should confirm that all imported plant material and certain produce is free of this pest.

With this system in place all phytosanitary certificates and related controls between member states will be abolished. Third country trade, ie. plant material from non-EEC countries, will continue to be subject to the present controls and be inspected at entry to the Community. Third country material in those categories requiring a passport would be given one when it was cleared for entry into the Community.

The Commission strategy also provides for the introduction of a Community Plant Health Inspectorate which would monitor the activities of all national inspectorates such as our own plant health service. To date a Chief Inspector, Mr. Gennatas, has been appointed and will be recruiting a small team of community inspectors. Their remit will be, amongst others, to ensure each community country is applying the rules fairly and correctly. They will, for example visit the UK to monitor and discuss our own methods of inspection and production checks. They will also have a pre-clearance role in certain 3rd countries for certain commodities.

For the new system of place of production control to operate effectively it will be necessary for all producers of plant material and certain traders and agents to be registered under the Community rules and their premises will have to be inspected. These inspections will cover only quarantine pests; it will not cover quality pests, varietal purity or other quality conditions. There are however three marketing schemes proposed; a scheme for young vegetable plants, a scheme for fruit plants and finally, a scheme for ornamental plants. If and when such schemes are introduced then in addition to the prime importance of ensuring production premises are free of quarantine pest and disease, quality pests, varietal purity etc. could form part of the new system. These schemes have interesting, and in some cases controversial features, which are being examined. There will clearly be an overlap between passport/quarantine requirements and the other requirements of any marketing scheme, ie. health standards. All our efforts must be devoted firstly to getting the new system, based on the passport agreed and in place. Marketing schemes such as those I have mentioned may have to wait.

As I have said, all producers of plant material, traders and agents will have to be registered with MAFF and will be visited by plant health officials on a regular basis.

This brings me finally to the question of responsibility for issuing the plant passports. It is quite clear that plant passports should only be issued when an officer of the responsible plant health authority is satisfied that the plant material is free of quarantine organisms and that the nursery or place of production is also free. However the physical process of labelling the material must be the responsibility of the producer under such official supervision as may be considered necessary dependent upon the perceived quarantine risks.