

GREEN EUROPE

NEWSLETTER ON THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

WHY PRODUCTS
ARE WITHDRAWN
FROM THE MARKET



FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

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FROM THE MARKET**

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FRUIT AND VEGETABLES - WHY PRODUCTS ARE WITHDRAWN FROM THE MARKET

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I. WITHDRAWAL, DESTRUCTION AND PUBLIC OPINION

Misunderstandings and prejudices

For some years now, public opinion in Europe has been taking an interest in the Community's policy for managing the fruit and vegetables market. Unfortunately, this management policy is identified by the majority of consumers with market intervention and wrongly evokes the distressing image of bulldozers destroying hundreds of kilos of unsold or unused fruit and vegetables.

This over-dramatic presentation of the problem has caught the public's attention but ignores the underlying political, economic and social reasons for this type of intervention. What is worse, it provokes a negative reaction in people; they see the withdrawal of fruit and vegetables from the market as synonymous with wastage and social injustice in a world where practically half the population is under-nourished or starving. Such concern is understandable and demands a response to clear up misunderstandings and prejudices due to lack of information.

Why withdrawal is necessary

In explaining why market support exists and how it works, it is important to mention that only eleven products are covered by the withdrawal system: eight kinds of fruit (apples, pears, peaches, oranges, mandarins, lemons, table grapes and apricots) and three kinds of vegetables (tomatoes, cauliflowers and aubergines). The number of products is deliberately limited and the European Commission has no intention of adding to the list. The withdrawal system as applied in the Community has three objectives:

- (i) to maintain farmers' incomes
- (ii) to ensure market stability
- (iii) to protect consumers' interests.

Guaranteeing a minimum income for producers means providing them with a fair standard of living compared with other farmers and people in other walks of life. Fruit and vegetable growers, in particular, are exposed to a serious risk of losing all their profits: the fruit and vegetables market has always suffered from seasonal surpluses which, failing a rapid sale (the products are extremely perishable), cause selling prices to collapse and growers to lose all their profits. The purpose of the market support system is to limit such losses; it does not offer any compensation for them, so there is absolutely no incentive for growers to produce goods for intervention - i.e. regardless of their chances of being marketed.

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Ensuring market stability means acting in time to stop prices dropping to a level likely to create a serious crisis on the Community market, with concomitant surpluses, especially since the liberalization of trade with non-Community countries and the granting of tariff concessions (mainly to Mediterranean countries) have made the Community more vulnerable to competition from imported fruit and vegetables, in particular citrus fruits.

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Protecting consumers' interests means, above all, guaranteeing supplies of the kind of food they want at the most stable and reasonable prices possible.

In accordance with one of the fundamental principles of the common agricultural policy, i.e. financial solidarity, the European Community bears the cost of buying up products withdrawn from the market for subsequent sale or donation, wherever possible, to:

- (i) economically disadvantaged social institutions,
- (ii) the distilling industry,
- (iii) farmers, for feeding to animals.

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Where it is impossible to find a use for certain products which are extremely perishable, like mandarins, or which are subject to exceptionally large harvests (as with apples in 1982/83), the only solution is for some of the withdrawn products to remain unused and perish.

Destruction is not, as many people believe, an instrument of Community intervention. It has always existed, in one form or another, and not only in the countries of the European Community. After all, what is to be done with a perishable product without a buyer?

II. INTERVENTION

An unstable market

The fruit and vegetables market is difficult to manage and the withdrawal system which has been in force in the Community since 25 October 1966 has gradually been adapted to ensure:

- (i) flexible operation
- (ii) swift decision-making

so that effective action can be taken when a market crisis develops.

These periodical crises have always occurred on the fruit and vegetables market, which is characterized by seasonally variable output and extremely perishable products.

Harvests can vary appreciably from year to year. Depending on the weather, a plentiful harvest or a poor one will produce a surplus or a shortage of products on the market. A glut will cause selling prices to collapse and growers' incomes to fall suddenly.

Unfortunately, the constraints of the trade limit the extent to which consumer prices can fall in response to a given market situation, and this curbs any increase in consumption. The profit margins between the wholesale and retail stages should reflect the market situation more faithfully; this would stimulate consumption and allow the consumer to benefit from the fall in the price paid to the grower for his fruit and vegetables. Seasonal surpluses are generally temporary and often limited to a particular region. At present, in the EEC as a whole, there is no surplus production of fruit and vegetables.

Each year the Community imports from third countries some four million tonnes of fresh fruit, two million tonnes of tropical fruit and another two million of processed fruit and vegetable products.

What is withdrawal?

In Community terms, "withdrawal" means withdrawing from the market certain kinds of product of satisfactory marketable quality for which there are no outlets in the usual distribution network.

So "to withdraw" does not mean "to throw away" and certainly not "to destroy". A product which is offered for intervention must meet the quality standards established for fruit and vegetables to be sold for consumption in the fresh state.

In order to reduce supply and thus the possible need for intervention, the Commission some years ago ceased to authorize the marketing of inferior qualities (i.e. qualities less acceptable to the consumer) of certain products including apples, pears, peaches, mandarins, some varieties of orange and, at certain periods, lemons. Such qualities are, however, used by the food processing industry.

With the same intention of limiting supply while improving quality, the European Commission decided on several occasions to increase the minimum size for large-fruited varieties of apple in the event of surplus production.

Nonetheless, certain quantities of substandard fruit and vegetables may be wrongfully taken into intervention in spite of systematic spot checking by national inspection authorities. Because the volume of products to be checked is so great, Brussels is proposing the assistance of EEC experts in order to prevent irregularities.

Up to now, very few irregularities have been notified. A small number of industries have processed, without authorization, products withdrawn from the market. But this has never resulted in a financial loss for the Community.

When does withdrawal take place?

The quantities of fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market are relatively small: compared with total Community production of these goods, withdrawals represent just over 2% on average, while compared with total production of varieties eligible for intervention,¹ they have represented just over 4% on average during the last ten marketing years. However, an exceptional apple crop raised the figure to 7% in 1982/83.

The volume of withdrawals is determined by the biological characteristics of the fruit and vegetables market, namely the wide variety and extremely short storage life of the products on offer.

Harvests can vary appreciably from year to year according to the weather. There was, for example, a record apple crop in 1982 exceeding 8.6 million tonnes (as against only 5 million tonnes in 1981). In relation to the requirements of the European market (about 6.7 million tonnes of apples), the 1981 crop was poor and the 1982 crop too large. For this reason, the average volume of withdrawals for the 1982/83 marketing year was exceptionally high.

Who orders withdrawal?

It is the responsibility of producers' organizations to act promptly when local market conditions make a crisis look likely or when the crisis becomes apparent, so as to avoid a more serious price collapse. The organizations withdraw from the normal distribution network products for which price quotations drop below a certain level because of a temporary surplus in supply.

¹See list on page 1.

This activity, together with the centralization of supplies, forms an important part of the organizations' activity and they receive from the Community, via the Member State, compensation for the quantities withdrawn; the amount of compensation is equal to the intervention price paid to the producers less any profits accruing from subsequent use of the product. Furthermore, the Community grants aid to help them strengthen their network so that they can influence market trends.

In the case of apples and pears, producers' organizations may be authorized, in certain production and marketing situations, to undertake preventive withdrawals.

Preventive withdrawals have been authorized since 1979.

This system:

- (i) avoids the costly stockpiling of unmarketable quantities of fruit;
- (ii) has a positive psychological effect on price levels;
- (iii) facilitates the disposal of withdrawn products;
- (iv) reduces intervention expenditure inasmuch as withdrawal prices at the beginning of the marketing year are lower than those in operation for the remainder of the marketing period.

The intervention price paid at the time of withdrawal, for ordinary or preventive intervention, depends on the characteristics of the product.

In the case of apples, for example, a difference of 55% was observed between the withdrawal price of the pilot product¹ and the withdrawal price of some small-fruited varieties. The aim is to compensate for the product on its own merits and to discourage the production of inferior quality varieties which are unacceptable to the consumer and therefore more difficult to market.

¹Product with defined characteristics, used for fixing basic and buying-in prices.

Table I - Quantities (tonnes) of fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market.

	1979/80 (% of total production) EEC - 9	1980/81 (% of total production) including Greece (6 months)	1981/82 (% of total production) EEC - 10	1982/83 (% of total production)
Apples	548 938 (7.89)	517 798 (7.33)	53 733 (1.07)	1 146 932 (13.43)
Pears	54 131 (2.57)	162 926 (6.96)	120 677 (5.35)	90 510 (3.80)
Peaches	111 090 (6.61)	55 620 (3.35)	343 936(15.22)	239 656 (10.89)
Oranges	2 737 (0.16)	101 091 (6.61)	73 243 (2.95)	126 914 (5.71)
Mandarins etc.	78 215 (36.14)	53 025(27.91)	82 032(27.99)	14 653 (5.58)
Lemons	-	21 755 (3.05)	70 253 (7.08)	160 386 (19.76)
Table grapes	-	530 (0.03)	-	-
Cauliflowers	40 732 (2.94)	13 217 (0.91)	12 069 (0.73)	40 108 (2.36)
Tomatoes	197 100 (3.06)	78 878 (1.30)	56 121 (0.72)	54 380 (0.70)
Aubergines	-	-	-	32 (0.008)
Apricots	-	-	-	343 (0.10)
TOTAL	1 032 943 (4.52)	1 004 840 (4.43)	812 064 (3.27)	1 873 914 (7.08)

EAGGF cost
(in millions
of ECU)

102.9

111.0

138.9

264.6

III. OBJECTIVES

The underlying objectives of the withdrawal system for fruit and vegetables are the same as those of the common agricultural policy, namely:

- (i) to maintain producers' incomes;
- (ii) to ensure market stability;
- (iii) to protect consumers' interests.

To maintain producers' incomes

Maintaining incomes means guaranteeing the producers a minimum income from their main products.

This is the price the Community pays for the existence of a single Community market, for the liberalization of trade with non-member countries and for the need to ensure regular supplies.

The withdrawal system enables activity in this branch of agriculture to be maintained by ensuring that the producer receives about 50% of the normal price for any quantities which he is unable to market.

Maintaining agricultural income does not mean covering producers' losses; the intervention price does not cover all the production costs. So there is very little, if any, incentive for growers to produce fruit and vegetables without regard for the chances of disposing of them on the market.

This is confirmed by the figures: producers tend to diversify their production without increasing the volume of products eligible for intervention. Total production of fruit in the Community between 1973-75 and 1978-80 rose by 2.6%; within this increase 0.8% consisted of products covered by the withdrawal system and 1.8% of more easily marketed products not covered by any price guarantee.

In any case, growers know there is no point in encouraging withdrawals, because the Council of Ministers takes account of the volume of withdrawals when it fixes agricultural prices at the beginning of each marketing year.

To ensure market stability

In the European Community today, market stability depends on constant attention to trends in production and marketing.

Market stability is achieved mainly by strengthening the position of producers' organizations and by obliging, in some circumstances, non-members to apply some of the rules of these organizations so that action can be taken as and when necessary in response to a given market situation.

This approach is dictated by the different marketing structures in the ten countries of the Community. Accordingly, the Council of Ministers of the EEC decided to increase, as from 1 June 1984, the financial aid granted for the setting up of new producers' organizations which offer their members facilities for storing, processing and marketing their products.

Furthermore, special attention will be given to the entry prices for products imported into the Community from non-member countries.

The aim is to prevent unfair competition from products offered at abnormally low prices which undercut selling prices within the Community, causing market imbalances and necessitating intervention in the form of withdrawals.

To protect consumers' interests

It is not enough to offer the consumer a wide variety of products. The products must also be available on the market at all times and at reasonable prices. This involves maintaining an adequate level of supply, without which consumers would be faced with a rise in retail prices. But this is possible only if we accept the idea of occasional surpluses and market intervention via the withdrawal system.

The question for the consumer is "what effect does the withdrawal cost have on the retail price of the product?"

Since the quantities withdrawn are so small compared with total EEC production, the cost of withdrawal may be said to have a negligible effect on consumer prices.

IV. USES

Once they are withdrawn from the normal distribution network, products must be used, according to Community rules, for other purposes so that the community as a whole can derive maximum benefit from them, without the positive effects of intervention being cancelled out.

The products may therefore be disposed of in various ways; above all they are made available:

- (i) to "social" institutions;
- (ii) to the distilling industry;
- (iii) for animal feed.

Social institutions to which the products may be given unprocessed include charity organizations, schools, prisons, children's holiday camps, hospitals, old people's homes and organizations for the poor. There have been free distributions of all types of products taken into intervention, except table grapes for which there have been no withdrawals yet. Aubergines, for example, were withdrawn for the first time during the 1982/83 marketing year and free distribution accounted for 89.61% of all the quantities bought in.

It is difficult to take full advantage of every opportunity to distribute fresh produce, on account of two factors:

- (i) time
- (ii) distance.

Time is important because the products will not be fresh unless they are delivered swiftly to the user.

Distance matters because it is difficult to supply products to users far from the place of intervention.

Furthermore, suitable means of transport are not always available in the short duration of the harvest period.

Direct distillation into alcohol of apples, pears and peaches accounts for a large proportion of the products withdrawn from the market.

Of the total quantities withdrawn in 1982/83, the percentages distilled were as follows:

- apples 47.9%
- pears 45.74%
- peaches 47.78%.

According to information supplied to the Commission by the industry, this activity seems to be profitable.

But the Commission is keeping a close watch on alcohol production because although this activity uses up large quantities of products withdrawn from the market it must not be allowed to disrupt the usual alcohol market.

The manufacture of juice from products withdrawn from the market presents difficulties. This outlet has proved excessively costly to the Community because of an abnormal increase in the quantities involved. In fact, the Council of Ministers, acting on a proposal from the Commission, has decided to cancel this option as from the 1984/85 marketing year.

The risk is too great, as the European Parliament pointed out, that the situation might distort the usual distribution patterns and give rise to malpractices in the system of tendering for public contracts.

Over the last ten years almost all the produce used for animal feed has been sold fresh. The vegetables concerned were cauliflowers and tomatoes and the fruits pears, apples, mandarins, lemons, oranges and, to a lesser extent, peaches.

Table II: Uses made of fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market, expressed as a percentage of the total volume withdrawn.

	Distributed free of charge				Processed into alcohol				Fed to animals				Unused			
	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1982/83	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1982/83	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1982/83	1979/80	1980/81	1981/82	1982/83
Apples	9.7 ¹	3.5	4.3	4.0 ¹	29.9	32.7	36.2	47.9	53.2	41.8	9.0	30.5	7.2	22.0	50.4	17.7
Pears	3.4 ¹	3.3	7.8 ¹	5.9	44.6	64.7	39.4	45.7	39.9	24.6	27.0	35.6	12.2	7.4	25.8	12.8
Peaches	7.6	14.3	3.7 ¹	10.8 ¹	54.5	52.9	17.3	47.8	0.2	1.7	0.5	0.7	37.8	31.1	78.6	40.6
Oranges	37.3	11.3	9.0	1.9 ¹	-	-	-	-	-	71.7	87.0	0.8	62.8	17.4	4.0	97.3
Mandarins, etc	14.9	8.5	15.0	6.3 ¹	-	-	-	-	7.7	2.1	9.6	10.5	77.4	89.4	75.4	83.2
Lemons	-	0.6	4.2	1.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	46.2	22.9	-	99.4	49.6	75.3
Table grapes	-	100.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Apricots	-	-	-	38.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cauliflowers	0.7	1.3	1.9	1.5	-	-	-	-	13.9	45.0	43.4	49.0	85.4	53.7	54.7	49.4
Tomatoes	2.5	3.3	5.1	6.3	-	-	-	-	18.9	10.8	19.2	60.6	78.6	85.9	75.7	33.0
Aubergines	-	-	-	89.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.4

1 Some of which were first processed into juice.

Destruction: the last stage?

European public opinion is, quite rightly, extremely responsive to the attention paid by the media to the destruction of fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market.

It must be stressed, however, that the destruction of fruit and vegetables is not regarded as an instrument of market management at Community level.

It is, in fact, simply the outcome of a situation in which the various other alternatives authorized under Community rules (giving the products to social institutions, making them available to the distilling industry, feeding them to animals) have been exploited to the full.

When producers' organizations withdraw fruit and vegetables from the market and are unable to dispose of them in one of the prescribed ways, they have no option but to reduce their stocks which would otherwise rot.

It must be repeated that, of the 1-2% of total production which is withdrawn from the market, only a very small proportion is destroyed by the producers' organizations.

Seeing the periodic destruction of fruit and vegetables while witnessing the unceasing and shocking spectacle of millions of starving people worldwide, some individuals generously propose sending these products, either fresh or processed, as food aid to the third world.

But it must be borne in mind that the fruit and vegetables destroyed by producers' organizations are of mediocre quality by Community standards and are usually extremely ripe by the time destruction takes place.

Moreover, the occasional transport of such extremely perishable products, unprocessed, would require a massive and costly infrastructure comprising refrigerated vehicles, suitable warehouses, and facilities for distributing the produce quickly to distant and scattered populations.

On the other hand, processing the products into juice or jam before sending them would necessitate considerable investment in branches of industry which would be used only sporadically.

It must be remembered that the Community is involved each year in a food aid programme which provides for free supply of large quantities of cereals and milk products, often transported at the Community's expense.

In emergencies food aid is supplied immediately to people threatened by famine.

Finally, it must be pointed out that people in poor countries, whose diet is unbalanced, generally require food other than fresh or processed fruit and vegetables.

Once all other authorized courses of action have been exploited to the full, by far the least costly outcome for the Community taxpayer is for the products to be left unused and to perish. This involves no expense for the Community over and above the cost of intervention: the cost of destruction is borne by the producers' organizations and not refunded from the Community budget.

Deterioration and non-use of the products thus protects the interests both of the producers, whose income is maintained, and of the consumers, who are guaranteed regular supplies.

V. COST

Intervention expenditure

The costs to the Community of operation of the withdrawal system is the price the EEC has to pay in order to maintain a balance on the organized markets.

These costs must not, of course, be allowed to place an intolerable burden on the Community budget, which is why the Commission is concerned not to increase the range of products eligible for intervention. It also opposes the frequently-made suggestion, that the fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market should be processed into juice, jam or other products which could be sent as food aid to third countries which need them. Although the suggestion is a generous one, the costs would be enormous and this type of operation requires effective collaboration with the authorities of the countries concerned not only in creating suitable structures for the storage and distribution of the products but also in changing the population's eating habits.

Since 1969 the Community has been supplying agricultural products to parts of the world threatened by famine. In 1980 these deliveries were worth 526.9 million ECU.

Spending on orchard clearance

The Community has tackled the problem of fruit and vegetable surpluses by implementing a policy of uprooting orchards.

Under this policy two operations have taken place: the first, in 1969, dealt with apples, pears and peaches and the second, in 1976, was restricted to certain varieties of apples and pears. It is possible that further operations of the same kind will be decided on by the EEC Council of Ministers on future occasions. The purpose of these operations was to get rid of orchards which, at frequent but irregular intervals, produce plentiful harvests, causing fluctuations in production volume and disturbing the market balance.

The first operation, in 1969, involved the uprooting of 88 000 hectares of fruit trees, comprising 69.1% apple trees, 23.2% pear trees and 7.7% peach trees.

The cost of the operation borne by the Member States was 70 million ECU of which 35 million was refunded by the Community.

The second operation, started in 1976, affected some 12 000 hectares of fruit trees comprising 73.6% apple trees and 26.4% pear trees.

Expenditure by the Member States on this second operation was 12 million ECU of which 6 million was refunded by the EEC.

Support for citrus fruit growing

The Community finances two types of operation: firstly, orchard conversion programmes whereby Community orchards are replanted to produce the varieties of citrus fruit most sought after by the consumer; secondly, action to improve marketing structures so as to facilitate disposal of the products.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The published figures may give the general public the impression that the existence of a market organization for fruit and vegetables encourages growers to produce large quantities regardless of the chances of finding market outlets. This, as we have seen, is completely untrue.

The unfortunate thing about the withdrawal system is that its visible aspect - mountains of produce being left to rot and a certain proportion being destroyed - shocks and offends public opinion.

The mechanisms and underlying objectives of the intervention system, which are fully defensible, have not, alas, been sufficiently publicized.

Perhaps it has not been stressed enough that temporary surpluses existed long before the introduction of the common agricultural policy but no one noticed them because the products rotted on the farms and the financial consequences were borne by the grower.

There is no alternative to the withdrawal system.

The system must be judged as a whole: the public has very often been aware of only one of its facets.

As has been shown, withdrawal does not mean ruthless destruction of fruit and vegetables.

The system has three arguments in its favour:

- (i) the incomes and employment of many European farming families are protected thanks to the withdrawal of fruit and vegetables;
- (ii) some 270 million consumers in Europe enjoy regular supplies of fruit and vegetables at reasonable prices and of a quality which meets approved standards. The withdrawal system must also be given the credit for this;
- (iii) the system is thus fair and profitable.

If the withdrawal system did not exist, the situation would be very different.

In the first place, large quantities of fruit and vegetables would be put on the market. Supply would considerably exceed demand, causing prices to collapse. This might be of short-term benefit to the consumer but would be a disaster for the grower who would be forced out of business. Before long, supplies of fruit and vegetables would fall dramatically, prices would shoot up and the consumers would suffer.

Growers, reluctant to take risks, would stop producing different varieties of fruit and vegetables.

Consumers, accustomed to a regular and varied supply of products, would inevitably suffer.

At the end of the day the only alternative to withdrawal is to allow production and prices of fruit and vegetables to be totally exposed to the relentless pressures of free market forces.

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