

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF QUALITY

KROMKOMMER CALLS FOR ABOLITION OF SPECIFIC EUROPEAN MARKETING STANDARDS FOR FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Over [a third](#) of all food that is produced worldwide goes to waste. This has an enormous influence on food security and the availability of resources. This wastage occurs during processing, at the retailer or in the consumer's kitchen, but food also goes to waste at the beginning of the production chain. For example, around 10% of all fruit and vegetables never even get to our table, because they do not satisfy the requirements for certain external characteristics. Food can be rejected for not meeting the retailer's quality standards, but

also because of European marketing standards that prescribe how fruit and vegetables should look. Quality standards for fruit and vegetables that focus on external appearance help exacerbate the problem of food wastage. Kromkommer believes that quality should stand for fresh, safe and delicious, and not for perfect looks. In this document, Kromkommer calls for the abolition of specific European marketing standards for fruits and vegetables.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUALITY REQUIREMENTS

After World War II, Dutch farmers have become adept at the efficient production of large quantities of inexpensive fruits and vegetables. This increased efficiency, combined with frequent surpluses in the Western world, has enhanced the focus on external characteristics (size, colour, shape, texture, etc.). As a result, over the past 30 years, quality has primarily been defined in terms of products that look identical, without external blemishes. The EU marketing standards reflect this assumption, and they provide a guideline for countries to define quality standards in the EU.

At the moment, there are three types of quality standards for fruit and vegetables:

1. The [general marketing standards](#), based on norms formulated by [UNECE](#) and [Codex Alimentarius](#), and embedded in EU legislation. In the Netherlands, these are enforced by the [Quality Control Bureau](#) (KCB) and

apply to all fruits and vegetables. These marketing standards are primarily focused on ensuring freshness, safety and flavour.

2. The [specific marketing standards](#), prescribed by EU legislation. These standards are also enforced in the Netherlands by the KCB. They supplement the general marketing standards, and broadly deal with external characteristics, such as size, shape, uniformity and flawlessness. In 2009, the specific marketing standards for 25 types of fruit and vegetables were [repealed](#). However, there are still specific standards for 11 types of fruit and vegetables, which together represent [75% of the commercial value](#) in the trade of fruits and vegetables.

3. Retailers' supplemental quality standards that primarily focus on external appearance and shelf life, and have almost no link to health or safety. These quality standards are not required by law, but strongly influence what growers may and may not supply to retailers.

THE CURRENT APPROACH TO QUALITY LEADS TO WASTAGE

The products that cannot find a home due to the market's current quality standards are occasionally used in the processing industry or sold at the street markets. However, a portion of the fruit and vegetables that do not meet these standards find their way back to the field, are never harvested, or end up as livestock feed or in the biodigester, even though they are fresh, safe and delicious. Based on visits to a large number of growers, Kromkommer estimates that 10-15% of the harvest never makes its way to our tables. These figures correspond to those published in this [Belgian, Dutch and British](#) report. In fact, around [40%](#) of tropical fruits such as kiwis and bananas never make it to the market because they do not have the ideal

size or shape. The general marketing standards have a clear added value: they are intended to guarantee fresh, safe and delicious products.

The specific marketing standards are primarily linked to external characteristics, and result in a division of products into quality classes 1, 2, and 3 (industry). Years ago, supermarkets (where [70%](#) of all fruits and vegetables end up) sold class 2 products as well as class 1. Today, most retailers sell only class 1 products. The focus on external perfection has even become one of the most important competitive values for the largest supermarkets in the Netherlands ("[For 6 years, the best in fruit and vegetables](#)" – Lidl).

This focus on class 1 products means that class 2 fruits and vegetables are increasingly overlooked, even though the differences between class 1 and 2 products are often barely visible (see image 1 & 2). Retailers' supplemental quality standards are not

regulated by law, but are rather created and enforced by the market, especially supermarkets. They are an addition to the general and specific marketing standards, and mainly deal with creating ever-greater perfection and a uniform appearance on the shelves.

image 1 skin damage



image 2 color or red stripes



THE NETHERLANDS AS A MODEL COUNTRY FOR CHANGE

We believe that the EU should set a good example for the market by abolishing the specific marketing standards. In doing so, it would create a clear framework for how we relate to our food: fresh, safe and delicious fruit and vegetables should not go to waste purely based on their appearance. As a major producer of fruit and vegetables, the Netherlands is an ideal country to play a leading role in this effort. Everyone benefits from fresh, safe and delicious fruit and vegetables, but strict selection for external appearance increases the likelihood that perfectly edible products will go to waste. It is our opinion that maintaining the specific marketing standards based on appearance is unethical and can no longer be justified. These standards are no longer appropriate in a time when it is considered vital to utilise resources efficiently in order to feed the

world's population. Changes must be made, especially in light of the ambitions agreed to in the Sustainable Development Goals: by 2030, global food wastage must be reduced by half. Abolishing the specific marketing standards would play an important role in helping to realise these goals.

In addition to abolishing the specific marketing standards, the retail sector should be encouraged to loosen their own quality standards, because abolishing the specific standards would not automatically result in retailers doing the same. We must prevent supermarkets from pushing their own quality standards farther in the direction of external perfection. Agreeing to a covenant in this area could provide an important contribution.

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW DEFINITION OF QUALITY. KROMKOMMER THEREFORE CALLS FOR:

- 1) The repeal of the European specific marketing standards, in favour of enforcing the general marketing standards that guarantee fresh, safe and delicious products.
- 2) Encouraging the retail sector to sign a covenant to relax its own (extra-legal) quality standards and to focus on fresh, safe and delicious products instead.