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By Mike Knowles

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## Swiss criticised on Saharan tomatoes

Coop Switzerland to stop sourcing tomatoes from Western Sahara in 2017, while Migros refuses to boycott area



A tomato production centre in Dakhla, Western Sahara (Image: Google Maps)

European retailers have come in for renewed criticism over the alleged practice of mislabelling produce sourced from Western Sahara, a disputed territory bordered by Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania.

Swiss supermarket chains Coop, Migros and Denner were all cited in a [recent report by national broadcaster SRF](#), which accused the chains of misleading consumers by labelling tomatoes and melons produced in the region as coming from Morocco.

"[Western Sahara] inhabitants, the Saharawi, live in poverty and have to stand idly by while their country is being exploited by its occupiers," the broadcaster said.

Since Spanish colonial rule ended in 1975, Morocco has refused to recognise claim to the territory made by local inhabitants.

In the meantime, the area has developed a notable tomato industry around the

town of Dakhla, a town on a narrow peninsula that sticks out into the Atlantic coast around 370 miles south of the Moroccan border.

According to various reports, major agribusinesses – including some owned by Morocco's King Mohammed VI and others based in France – supply tomatoes grown near Dakhla that are subsequently being labelled with Morocco as the country of origin.

Responding to the claims, Coop Switzerland told SRF it had already begun to switch its sourcing programme away from Western Sahara.

Two years ago, the retailer made headlines with its [decision to introduce a Western Sahara label on some of its tomatoes](#).

"Conditions [in the area] no longer comply with our Sustainable Procurement policy, since all of the irrigation is based on ancient groundwater reserves. Since we revised

our directive last autumn, this is explicitly prohibited."

It added: "Starting next year, cherry tomatoes on the vine will come from Agadir in Morocco."

Migros, however, said it did not plan to boycott Western Sahara, from which it reportedly sources around 2 per cent of the melons it sells.

"Customers can choose for themselves the countries from which they want to buy products," a spokesperson told SRF, adding that it would continue sourcing from "sensitive countries, provided its suppliers continued to meet requirements with respect to working conditions."

Last year, [The Guardian published a story](#) in which it was claimed that Tesco and Morrisons labelled sweet mixed baby tomatoes produced by companies in the Sahara as produce of Morocco.

Six years ago, [Swedish grocery chain Axfood took action](#)

after discovering that Dakhla-grown cherry

<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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tomatoes sold in some of its stores had been wrongly labelled as coming from Southern Morocco.

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