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By Peter Crosskey

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Trade concerned over French lorry tax



Lorries will be charged automatically using electronic sensors fitted in the vehicle's cab

Industry not yet fully prepared for new road taxation scheme due to be rolled out from the start of October

Road transport companies serving the fresh produce business in western Europe are apparently not yet prepared for new regulations due to be introduced by France from the start of October, which will mean an estimated 800,000 domestic and foreign lorries using French roads are subject to an additional tax.

Known as *écotaxe*, the new charge applies to all lorries weighing more than 3.5 tonnes and is set to be calculated by electronic sensors fitted to the vehicles, with money then debited automatically at between €0.09 and €0.15 per km.

"The whole thing is up in the air," Patrice Prud'homme, board member of the French national fruit and vegetable shippers' association Aneefel, told Eurofruit. "The transporters haven't even sent us their October rate cards yet. Nobody really knows how much it is likely to cost, either."

Although the company in charge of rolling out the scheme, Ecomouv', has confirmed the sensors will be available from more than 300 locations in France, as well as a handful in the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, it remains unclear how the 600,000 lorries registered in France and a further 200,000 foreign vehicles will be able to install them and set up a payment account before the 1 October deadline.

The plan could have a significant and extensive impact on the fresh produce business in Europe, especially in the longer term if *écotaxe*'s implementation proceeds smoothly.

It represents the first time an EU member state has implemented this particular European framework law, and Eurofruit understands both Italy and Germany are considering introducing similar schemes for their own roads should the French roll-out prove successful.

According to Sylvain Bard, communications director at French fruit exporter Blue Whale, the effect of the *écotaxe* will most probably be on the prices paid by consumers.

The company is preparing to begin this year's apple season in earnest, with a sizeable proportion of the fruit due to be shipped north and east into other parts of Europe.

"Nothing is clear yet, but we expect it to add between 4 per cent and 4.8 per cent to our transport costs," Bard suggested.

Read more: EU watches French tax plan with interest

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