

DONKEYS, SEEDS “SMUGGLERS” IN-CHIEF

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Smuggling seeds and bedding plants is still a profitable business in Macedonia. Illegal crossings towards Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria are used for the illegal trade and loaded donkeys are the main “transportation mean” for the material being smuggled. During last ten years, when growing vegetables for the agriculture workers in the country has become a priority way to make money, the sell of “quality seeds” in the farm chemicals stores has increased as well.

Import channels are well elaborated, and because it is about a small quantity of light material, it can be transferred and hidden very easily in bags and cases pockets taken through legal border crossings.

Many things are smuggled, starting from expensive seeds for production of tomatoes and peppers, the price of which can go up to tens of thousands of euros per kilogram, to seeds for planting fruits and wine, artificial fertilizers and products for weed, pests and diseases protection. According to many, the earning from smuggling seeds and bedding material is compared with the earnings from excise products. It is difficult for the Police and Customs officials to react since the seeds can literally be hidden in a pocket.

Donkeys at illegal border crossings

I have been in this business for about ten years, I have been successful in my job and so far I have not had any problems with law enforcement officials – this is how a former agriculturist, who has been “Quality seeds” supplier for the half of Eastern Macedonia for the last few years, begins his story.

- Business is agreed in advance and usually we have several “tours” during spring, when it is high season. We agree upon time of transport, and the load is taken by donkeys and horses. People from the other side of the border let them go on the other side, and we wait for them at our side of the crossing, says the “trader”. According to him, several years ago business was better, and many things were transported, like poultry materials, which have not been in use for a long time here, flowers seed etc.

- Now controls are stricter, inspection officials discover the crossings, but we are always ready to find an alternative. However, it has paid out more to import seeds “legally” lately, among other things carried through borders, explains the trader. He confirms that it is best to work with expired seeds and rotten cattle food, and there is less money in prohibited products for protection of plants and wines which does not meet our standards, which are mainly used as a basis for mixing with other wines.

Farmers suffer the greatest damage

Farmers say that the situation with smuggling of seeds is alarming and that although there are fines, the traders earn the most in that way.

- Last year I bought tomato seeds which were supposed to guarantee me high crops. At the same time I had my own seeds, left from the previous year. In the end it turned out that my seeds gave me tomatoes with higher quality. When I complained to the trader that his seeds were bad, he told me that I did not know how to grow vegetables – says Tome Stojanovski, a farmer from Strumica.

His colleague Stojan Todorovski from Kriva Palanka explains that he is buying quality and expensive potato or pepper seeds every year.

- Some of us even take loans for planting new wines and fruits, they buy bedding plants, and when harvest time comes, it turns out that, instead of the imported kind you chose, you actually bought something which can be found in every field in our country for free – says Todorovski.

Farmers from Strumica experience great difficulties with inadequate seeds. They purchase the seeds for vegetable production from various sources, and farm stores are the favorite destination for many, which are located in the closest cities at the border crossings. Sources for “Dnevnik” state that there are many not registered traders and individuals offering seeds and bedding plants without quality and origin guarantees. Although they know that they are purchasing cheaper seeds with suspicious quality, farmers from Strumica are forced to do that due to poverty.

- Few years ago I got “burnt” by cheaper tomato seeds from Bulgaria. However, I bought seeds from there again last year. It has no guarantee and certificates, but because of the disastrous results last year and the poverty, I am forced to that. I have planted the tomatoes, so may God help me – says B.R., a farmer from a village near Strumica.

Representatives from the Macedonian Farmers’ Association explain that besides the inspections on the spot, traders continue with their illegal activities which very often harm greatly the farmers.

- We are aware that it is a common occurrence in the country, but we hope that everybody dealing with illegal activities will be punished by the laws, says Veljo Tantaró, the president of the Macedonian Farmers’ Association. Representatives from the Association told us that it is about smuggling which is difficult to discover, but there are disastrous consequences at the end of the season.
- Farmers pay less when it comes to seeds, but during harvest times when the earning is supposed to come, they realize the loss they have caused to themselves, say at the MFA.

SECOND PART

THE LAWS EXIST, THEY ARE NOT ENFORCED

Title: There are laws, they are enforced with difficulties

Subtitle: It is difficult for the Police and customs to react, because seeds can be literally transported in a pocket.

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Seeds and bedding plants have been a good basis for easy illegal earnings in the past few years – say the representatives of the Farmers' inspection. According to them, it is difficult to discover smuggling due to small-sized seeds transported in pockets, but they explain that import of illegal bedding seed has been decreased significantly and the illegal trade with products for plant protection has been almost stopped.

At the Ministry of Agriculture say that in order to prevent smuggling of agriculture products, seeds, low-quality fertilizers and alike, the state adopted the Law on State Inspectorate in Agriculture, by which agriculture inspectors are assigned with authorizations like policemen.

- For the sake of better organizational positioning, better coordination while performing inspection survey and getting quality, the Law on State Inspectorate in Agriculture has been adopted. This Law precisely incorporates the Law on Infringements, infringement procedure, a procedure for equalizing and mediation which foresees increased fines of 3500 to 5000 euro, in denars, for companies committing infringements, say the representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Law states that citizens will be fined from 1000 to 2000 euros, in denars.

Representatives of the Agriculture Inspectorate say that this law brings quality and at the same time it acts towards increasing the level of general security for the final users and decreasing the risk of life and health threats for the animals.

- An inspector may issue a decision for prohibiting performing activities and closing a facility. Besides financial fines for the subject performing an infringement, a security measure is also foreseen – confiscation of objects, means, products, plants, fish etc, as well as confiscation of property and property value gained by the infringement, says Vanco Dimitriev, the Head of Agriculture Inspection.

He explains that until two years ago there was a tendency for illegal import of plant protection products. In 2008 coordinated controls were organized, during which 3.6 tons of various products for plant protection were confiscated, where as 2.5 tons were products without origin, instructions for use and declaration written in Macedonian language, import license and a license for marketing, says Dimitriev.

He says that it meant it was about illegally imported products. At that time controls were conducted in collaboration with the MIA, at illegal selling points, illegal border crossings, green markets, as well as at companies' warehouses – gross importers, as well as at agriculture pharmacies.

Dimitriev says that today smuggling has been decreased, but it still exists.

- Individual farmers whose basic activity is in agriculture, are enough educated on what to use in agricultural production. In a possible damage caused by use of plant protection product which has no origin, they can not prove the damage before us and before the court, which means they lose, says Dimitriev.

Professors at the Faculty of Agriculture and Food say that seeds are the most important segment for quality and healthy production.

- All anomalies must be eliminated together with the farmers. They should purchase seeds from a registered company, which guarantees the quality of seeds. Agriculture pharmacies in our neighborhood are not duty free shops and no one is allowed to import seeds without a license, say the professors.

The persons who are well informed on the situation say that quantities of one kilogram are more and more smuggled, which is later on mixed with low quality seeds and offered for sale.

The latest data from the Ministry of Agriculture indicate that last year the Agriculture inspection conducted over 17000 controls and issued 538 decisions for elimination of irregularities and prevention of illegal activities. Phito-sanitary inspectors have conducted 74.000 controls at eight border crossings and at five loading sights, during which they made approximately 30 minutes, 14 decisions for prohibiting activities by the legal subject, and three parcels of seeds and bedding material were completely destroyed.