



THE FRUIT AND VEGETABLE INDUSTRY SERIES



FRUIT AND VEGETABLES SCHEME



Session n°10 The rise of convenience: How ready-to-eat foods are reshaping the Fruit and Vegetable sector

Highlights

About the Fruit and Vegetable (F&V) Industry Series

In the context of the United Nations (UN) 2021 International Year of Fruits and Vegetables, the OECD Fruit and Vegetables Scheme of the Trade and Agriculture Directorate and COLEAD launched an online series **highlighting the significance of the F&V sector and its various dimensions**. The objectives are to share knowledge of markets and operators working in local and export F&V markets; understand the F&V sector's contribution to sustainable production and consumption; promote the contribution of F&V to healthy and nutritious diets; and showcase the successes and innovations of private sector operators across the European Union and Southern countries, along with lessons learned.

Session 10 explored how Ready-to-Eat (RTE) Foods are transforming the fruit and vegetable sector by meeting growing consumer demands for convenience, health, and sustainability. The session gathered regulatory experts, European and African entrepreneurs, and sustainability leaders to discuss trends, innovations, and challenges in the RTE space.

399 participants registered for the session to gain insights, access valuable resources explore entrepreneurial opportunities, and engage with leading voices in the F&V industry.

Programme: [Link](#)

Biodata: [Link](#)

Recording of the session: [Link](#)

Key points discussed

Consumer demand and market evolution

The global rise of convenience foods is being driven by urbanisation, dual-income households, and increasingly fast-paced lifestyles. RTE products are gaining popularity as they align with consumer preferences for quick, nutritious, and sustainable food solutions. From salads and fruit snacks to smoothie kits and dried fruits, the integration of fresh produce into convenient formats is shifting perceptions of RTE foods as healthier alternatives.

Regulatory developments and food safety challenges

Speakers from the European Commission and Freshfel Europe highlighted recent regulatory changes impacting the RTE segment. New EU rules on origin labelling for pre-cut fruits and vegetables, effective from January 2025, aim to enhance transparency for consumers. These measures also pose logistical and cost-related challenges for businesses. Operators must now indicate specific country of origin for each ingredient, complicating sourcing, processing, and packaging operations.

Further regulatory pressure stems from forthcoming food safety requirements, such as mandatory listeria challenge testing for RTE production facilities. These measures demand substantial investment in testing protocols and laboratory capacity. These rules are critical for safeguarding consumer health but risk creating barriers for smaller operators in accessing markets.

Innovations in processing and packaging

Technological advances are central to the RTE sector's growth. From vacuum sealing and high-pressure processing to biodegradable trays and QR-code-enabled packaging, innovation is improving shelf life, traceability, sustainability, and consumer engagement. Operators like OP OASI and Blue Skies illustrated how investments in quality, safety, and environmentally friendly materials enhance market competitiveness while reducing food waste.

Entrepreneurial opportunities and resilience strategies

The featured entrepreneurs showcased scalable business models that centre on sustainability and inclusive value chains. Blue Skies, with facilities across Africa and Latin America, adds value at source by processing fruit locally, generating over 8,000 jobs globally. Their holistic approach to resilience includes farmer support, local employment, certification assistance, and community-led development. Bertille Marcos, CEO of Les Fruits Tillou (Benin), underscored how RTE fruit products such as dried pineapple and bottled juice are opening export markets while boosting incomes for over 1,600 organic farmers. However, challenges in cold chain logistics, climate impacts, and raw material availability persist. Salvatore Antonio from OP OASI (Italy) highlighted how their producer organisation delivers high-quality ready-to-eat salads across Europe, but also faces rising energy and packaging costs, stringent sustainability demands, and the ongoing need to educate consumers.

Bridging global South and North markets

The session highlighted how entrepreneurs in the Global South can leverage growing demand for healthy, convenient foods. By adopting food safety standards, sustainable packaging, and digital tools, Southern SMEs can explore regional trade under frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and target diaspora and health-conscious markets abroad.

Priorities for the F&V sector

Despite inflationary pressures and consumer price sensitivity, the RTE fruit and vegetable sector is expected to continue expanding. However, inclusive growth will require targeted support for SMEs, improved access to food technology and laboratories, harmonised regulations, and continued investment in consumer education and sustainability.

Meet our speakers

Egle Baecke-Eimontaite, Director Advocacy & Regulatory Affairs, Freshfel Europe

At Freshfel Europe, Eglė represents the interests of the fresh fruit and vegetable sector at the European level, closely monitoring EU legislation on food safety, product quality, and labelling standards. She plays a key role in developing and implementing proactive advocacy initiatives and is also the Secretary-General of the European Sprouted Seeds Association (ESSA), coordinating activities related to sprouted seeds within the EU. Eglė has been actively involved in EU-funded projects, including the FreshProducePEFCR, which aims to establish environmental footprint calculation rules for fresh products. She has represented Freshfel Europe in discussions with the Czech Presidency of the EU Council, addressing food safety and the competitiveness of the fresh produce sector. With expertise in European and

international food policy, Eglé is dedicated to ensuring that regulations support the sector's sustainability, safety, and competitiveness.

Eglé provided a concise overview of current trends and regulatory developments in the ready-to-eat (RTE) fruit and vegetable (F&V) sector. She noted that major differences in product ranges across EU countries driven by cultural and culinary habits limit market harmonization and growth. A significant expansion of the RTE segment is not expected soon. She highlighted the regulatory environment and limited consumer access as key obstacles preventing food business operators (FBOs) from scaling up RTE operations. Eglé stressed the need for stronger public and private efforts to promote healthy diets, with intact and pre-cut produce placed at the core of EU food policy an area currently underprioritized by decision-makers.

Supply chain fragility was also discussed. RTE production depends on stable sourcing, yet climate events and logistical disruptions frequently impact availability. Maintaining a continuous cold chain is vital for product safety and shelf life but also limits distribution. Strict hygiene and routine testing requirements add further operational complexity, especially for SMEs. Eglé outlined the implications of Commission Regulation (EU) 2024/2895, which mandates Listeria challenge testing from July 2026 posing financial and technical challenges, particularly for smaller players. She also noted the uncertainty surrounding packaging regulations (Reg. 2025/40) and the current lack of viable alternatives to plastic.

A central focus of her talk was the new origin labelling regulation (EU) 2023/2429, effective January 2025. This rule requires RTE products to declare a single origin per ingredient, complicating sourcing, logistics, and packaging especially for mixed-product packs. Frozen products are exempt, creating regulatory inconsistency. Eglé argued the rule does not improve traceability, adds costs, and reduces sourcing flexibility, disproportionately affecting small and local suppliers.

She concluded that the policy is politically driven, lacking a clear sustainability or consumer benefit. Studies show that price and convenience outweigh origin in consumer decisions, and that mandatory origin labelling could hinder innovation and competitiveness in the RTE sector if not carefully adapted to market realities.

Antoine Michotte Renier, Expert, F&V Regulations & Standards, European Commission (DGAGRI)

Antoine Michotte Renier plays a central role in developing standards to ensure the safety, quality, and sustainability of agricultural products, particularly fruits and vegetables. He has contributed to key projects such as the revision of marketing standards under the European Green Deal and the "Farm to Fork" strategy. Antoine is also involved in applied research initiatives, such as the detection of undesirable substances in food, enhancing traceability and food safety across Europe.

Antoine Michotte presentation focused on the implications of Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2429, particularly regarding origin labelling and marketing standards for ready-to-eat (RTE) and pre-cut fruit and vegetables, also referred to as "fourth range" products. Based on Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 (CMO), the EU sets marketing standards for fruit and vegetables, requiring that products sold fresh to consumers must be of marketable quality and indicate their country of origin (Article 76).

The new regulation applies to fresh fruits and vegetables, certain dried fruits (e.g., figs, grapes), and ripened bananas. Products must indicate origin even if they are trimmed, cut, or not intact, such as in fourth range presentations. For mixes of different products or species, each product must meet relevant marketing standards. The origin labelling for such mixes must be precise (e.g., listing each country), and generic labels like "EU and non-EU" are not permitted. Simplified origin labels like "EU" or "non-EU" are allowed only under specific

conditions. Exemptions include: cooked ingredients (e.g., cooked maize) in mixed packs are not subject to the origin labelling rules unless omitting origin would mislead consumers (under FIC Regulation 1169/2011). Antoine indicated that the regulation applies uniform origin labelling rules to both intact and pre-cut produce. He emphasized that the new rules are designed for transparency but acknowledged their practical complexity, especially for the RTE segment. Operators must adapt labelling, sourcing, and packaging practices to comply with strict origin indication rules.

Fleur De Wit, Senior Sustainability Manager, Blue Skies Holding Ltd, United Kingdom

Fleur De Wit serves as the Senior Sustainability Manager at Blue Skies Holding Ltd, a pioneering UK-based company specializing in fresh-cut fruits and juices sourced directly from farms across Africa, South America, and other regions. With a background in engineering and a deep commitment to sustainable development, Fleur plays a central role in shaping and implementing the company's sustainability strategy from ethical sourcing and packaging innovation to waste reduction and community empowerment. She collaborates closely with farmers, suppliers, and internal teams to ensure that Blue Skies delivers high-quality, ready-to-eat products that respect both people and the planet.

Fleur de Wit's presentation focused on Blue Skies' entrepreneurial model and its approach to building resilience across the fresh-cut fruit supply chain, particularly in producing countries. Founded 28 years ago, Blue Skies operates with the core principle of "adding value at source," meaning that fruit such as pineapple, mango, pomegranate, and melon is processed and packed in the country of origin, rather than being exported in raw form. This model aims to deliver products that are "Fresh from Harvest" while supporting local economies. The company has developed a network of facilities close to production areas, allowing it to generate employment, ensure freshness, and return more value to farming communities. Fleur emphasized that Blue Skies is guided by a strong ethical framework known as the "Blue Skies Way," built around respect for people, communities, and the environment.

Blue Skies' sustainability goals are ambitious: achieving zero deforestation, zero waste to landfill, and net-zero emissions by 2050, with interim targets including 50% renewable energy use and 150,000 trees planted by 2030. These goals are tied to operational strategies such as reducing water use, enhancing supplier screening, and improving employee development.

Fleur also highlighted how Blue Skies builds resilience at multiple levels: (i) with farmers through agronomic support, soft loans, R&D, training, and group certification; (ii) with communities via the Blue Skies Foundation, which delivers education, health, and water projects in partnership with retailers like Waitrose and Albert Heijn; (iii) within its facilities, by fostering local expertise, rapid decision-making, and a strong culture of teamwork and employee care. While the model brings significant benefits, Fleur acknowledged ongoing challenges related to climate variability, logistics, and maintaining sustainability commitments across global markets. Nevertheless, Blue Skies remains committed to inclusive growth and to delivering positive returns for people, communities, and the planet.

Bertille Marcos, CEO, Les Fruits Tillou, Benin

Bertille Marcos Guèdègbé is a Beninese agronomist and entrepreneur, founder and CEO of Les Fruits Tillou, a company specializing in the production and export of organic pineapples and pineapple juice. Since its creation in 2000, the company has grown to become a key player in the pineapple industry in Benin, working with over 1,600 certified organic producers, enabling full traceability and control over its supply chain. In 2015, she launched Les Jus Tillou, an industrial pineapple juice production unit. Bertille has also invested in a fruit drying unit to produce organic dried pineapples for the European market. Her company

is Global GAP and HACCP certified, with products primarily exported to Europe. The company processes and markets fresh pineapples, dried fruit, and a wide variety of bottled juices (pineapple, mango, baobab, ginger, orange, bissap). All products are additive- and sugar-free, reflecting the company's core value: offering nutritious, natural food. Its exports reach consumers in France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and the USA, while also maintaining a strong presence in West African markets. In addition to her contribution to local economic development, Bertille supports women's empowerment and sustainable agriculture, with around 300 farmers certified organic. The company has also benefited from several support programs, including those from COLEACP, to train farmers in best agricultural practices.

Bertille outlined the evolution of "Les Fruits Tillou" from a family venture into a regional exporter of organic RTE fruit products. She detailed their product range including dried pineapple and mango, organic juices, and cocktail blends and their dual-market strategy serving both West African and international markets. She stressed the importance of organic certification and food safety compliance as market enablers and pointed to critical bottlenecks in logistics infrastructure and seasonal sourcing that limit production scalability. Bertille emphasized that while demand for natural, RTE fruit products is growing, the company faces several challenges such as (i) limited access to refrigerated containers, affecting cold chain logistics; (ii) inconsistent availability of raw materials, and (iii) climate variability and competition from larger buyers. Looking ahead, Les Fruits Tillou plans to industrialize dried fruit production, invest in raw material sourcing, and complete construction of a cold storage facility to enhance supply chain resilience.

Bertille concluded by reaffirming the company's identity: innovative, quality-driven, and rooted in sustainability. Les Fruits Tillou remains committed to delivering authentic, health-conscious products that benefit both consumers and the environment.

Salvatore Antonio, Président du Conseil d'administration, OP OASI, Italy

Salvatore Antonio is a prominent figure in Italy's fruit and vegetable sector, recognized for his expertise in convenience foods and ready-to-eat (RTE) produce. As Chairman of the Board of OP OASI, a major agricultural producers' organization based in Battipaglia, he leads the company in supplying fresh-cut and packaged vegetables to markets in Italy and across Europe and to leading brands like Bonduelle, processing over 110 million bags of vegetables annually. Founded in 2005, the organisation was created to aggregate and enhance regional agricultural excellence through strict technical, ethical, and sustainability standards. Since January 2024, it has also been recognized as a European Producer Organisation, with all its members certified under rigorous quality schemes.

Salvatore also serves as President of the IV Gamma Committee within Confagricoltura and Vice President of UNAPROA, playing a key role in shaping policies and driving innovation in Italy's fresh produce sector. He is a strong advocate for sustainable packaging solutions, focusing on recyclable materials and advancing traceability and transparency.

Salvatore Antonio presented OP OASI's integrated production-to-distribution model for RTE salads. He explained the operational and environmental complexity involved in delivering portioned, safe, and high-quality salads to European consumers. From greenhouse management to modified atmosphere packaging, his presentation illustrated how technological precision and certification frameworks are essential and how the sector must learn to produce more and better with fewer resources, adapting to environmental pressures and increasing demand. He called for better consumer education on the value of RTE salads and shared how the organisation is investing in energy savings, recyclable packaging, and streamlined logistics. A shift toward eco-design and circular economy principles is essential which requires collaboration across supply chains, retail networks, and public institutions. For OP OASI, meeting these challenges means investing in innovation, certification, and multi-stakeholder engagement and the commitment to making the RTE salads industry more sustainable, responsible, and resilient, both within Italy and across Europe.

Resources

1. Report and studies

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USDA-ERS (2024), “[Satisfying Fruit and Vegetable Recommendations Possible for Under \\$3 a Day](#)” by Stewart et al.

2. Trainings and webinars

[The Rise of Fresh Snacking](#): Revolutionizing Convenience, by SPINS,

[Convenience Foods and Consumer Trends](#), by Innova Market Insights

[Produce Safety Immersion Program](#) , IFPA, 6-month, produce-specific program that builds skills around RTE produce safety, traceability, and compliance

[Listeria Management for the Produce Industry Certificate Program](#) by IFPA, focuses on controlling Listeria in fresh-cut produce facilities directly applicable to RTE fruit and vegetable safety

[ProduceEDU Courses](#) : The Packer by PMG/The Packer, contains multiple courses relevant to RTE F&V (e.g., sustainable packaging, merchandising, carbon footprint, CEA, carbon footprint)

COLEAD, <https://training.colead.link/>

OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/agriculture/fruit-vegetables/>.

[Convenience Retailers](#): Navigating the Future Workforce



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