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FEATURED Q&A

Can Latin American Producers Contain the Banana Fungus?



A banana fungus that has wiped out crops in Asia has spread to Latin America, where the fruit is a major export. // File Photo: Wageningen University.

Q A fungus known as Panama TR4 disease, which has devastated banana plantations in southeast Asia for the past three decades, has reached Latin America, where two-thirds of the global banana trade originates. The arrival of the fungus, which does not affect humans but causes infected plants to stop producing fruit, has raised alarm in Ecuador and Colombia, as well as in Central America. How big of a threat is the disease to Latin America's banana production, and how can its spread be contained? What measures are being taken to prepare for the potential expansion of the fungus' reach, and how can farmers and exporters protect themselves? Which countries' economies would be most affected, and what implications could it have for the global banana trade?

A David Nowell, plant production and protection officer at the regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean at the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization: "There are several reasons for serious concern over TR4: the fungus is soil-borne and its complete eradication is impossible using existing chemicals or other management methods; most banana varieties are susceptible to TR4, including the Cavendish variety which provides almost all international trade supply; and there is currently no resistant variety that can replace the Cavendish and other susceptible varieties. Losses to TR4 can be up to 100 percent, and if allowed to spread, it will affect commercial producers and small-scale/family farmers equally as badly. Therefore, this is not only a disease that will result in financial losses but also can seriously reduce food security, nutrition and livelihoods wherever

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Mastercard Halts Services to Two Venezuelan Banks

The company has suspended services to the Bank of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces and Agricultural Bank of Venezuela amid U.S. sanctions on the South American country.

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BUSINESS

H&M Stops Buying Leather From Brazil

The fashion retailer said it would not buy leather exports from Brazil until it could be sure that the exports are not connected to environmental damage.

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POLITICAL

Bahamas Death Toll Could Be 'Staggering': Health Minister

The official death toll rose to 30 after Hurricane Dorian struck the Bahamas, but the country's health minister, Duane Sands, said that figure could go much higher. Thousands still may be missing.

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Sands // File Photo: Government of the Bahamas.

POLITICAL NEWS

Thousands Possibly Missing in Bahamas, Toll Likely to Climb

The death toll from Hurricane Dorian, which pounded the Bahamas for days, rose to 30 on Thursday, but officials warned that thousands more could be missing and that the number of casualties may be staggering, CNN reported. "Literally hundreds, up to thousands of people are still missing," said Joy Jibrilu, the director general of the Caribbean nation's tourism and aviation ministry. The Bahamas' health minister, Duane Sands, told Guardian Radio that additional body bags, morticians and refrigerated coolers are being sent to the Abaco Islands and other affected areas after morticians in Abaco ran out of coolers to store remains. "The public needs to prepare for unimaginable information about the death toll and the human suffering," said Sands. He said the final death toll could be "staggering," BBC News reported. "Make no bones about it, the numbers will be far higher," he said, according to CNN. "It is going to be significantly higher than that," he said of the official death toll of 30. "And it's just a matter of retrieving those bodies, making sure we understand how they died. It seems like we are splitting hairs, but not everyone who died, died in the storm." Still, there was some good news as rescue crews searched for survivors. The U.S. Coast Guard said it had rescued 201 people as of Thursday. International rescue teams sent helicopters and small planes to the Bahamas' northern islands in order to rescue stranded residents and also provide food to those who have been displaced. "Our emergent priority is to get the critically wounded out and help the government of the Bahamas get the infrastructure back up so it's safe, sanitary and livable—at least on a temporary basis—for those folks," said U.S. Coast Guard Captain James Passarelli. A British navy ship has also been dispatched to aid in the relief effort, with crew members distributing food and water and also helping to clear debris from roads, said the Bahamas' national security minister, Marvin

Dames. Grand Bahama Island's only international airport was heavily damaged and cannot be used as a staging ground for deliveries of emergency aid or for evacuations, CNN reported. Debris was scattered on the airport's runway, and wreckage of a small aircraft was tossed inside the airport's domestic terminal. The International Red Cross has said that up to 45 percent of the homes on Grand Bahama and the Abaco Islands, or some 13,000 properties, have been destroyed or damaged, BBC News reported.

BUSINESS NEWS

Mastercard Suspends Services to Two Venezuelan Banks

New York-based Mastercard has suspended its services to two Venezuelan banks due to U.S. sanctions aimed at forcing President Nicolás Maduro from power, Reuters reported Wednesday. In a Twitter post, the state-run Bank of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces said it "denounces to its civilian and military clients ... the suspension of interbank services for its credit cards on the part of the American company Mastercard." The U.S. Treasury Department in March told the three largest card facilitators in the United States—Visa, Mastercard and American Express—that they could not continue doing business with Venezuelan state institutions after March 2020. The second Venezuelan bank suspended by Mastercard is the Agricultural Bank of Venezuela, the Associated Press reported. It is unclear what the practical impact of the suspensions will be, because the banks are small. Hyperinflation has disrupted traditional financial practices in Venezuela's shattered economy, and accurate data on transactions is not readily available. Some media reports suggest Venezuelans have reduced use of credit cards, whose credit limits rarely keep up with price increases, while others suggest consumers are using credit cards more often amid a scarcity of cash. The Bank of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces

NEWS BRIEFS

Chile's Economic Activity Rises 3.2 Percent in July

Chile's economic activity rose 3.2 percent in July from the same month a year ago, the central bank said on Thursday, Reuters reported. The IMACEC economic activity index encompasses about 90 percent of the economy tallied in gross domestic product figures. Manufacturing and trade indicators rose, while mining activity continued to lag, growing 1.1 percent as compared to the same month last year. On Monday, the central bank cut its benchmark interest rate to a nine-year low, Bloomberg News reported.

U.S. Approves \$400 Mn for Argentina Highway Project

The United States on Thursday approved a \$400 million highway investment in Argentina, Reuters reported. The announcement was made in Jujuy, where a U.S. delegation led by President Donald Trump's eldest daughter, Ivanka Trump, met with Argentine Foreign Minister Jorge Faurie and Minister of Transportation Guillermo Dietrich. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the U.S. government's development finance body, will finance the expansion of a 544-mile toll road, which stretches from Buenos Aires to the Chilean border.

Vásquez Sworn in as New Panama Canal Administrator

Economist Ricaurte Vásquez Morales was sworn in Thursday as the new administrator of the Panama Canal, the canal authority said in a statement. The Panama Canal Board of Directors selected Vásquez as the new head of the Panama Canal Authority in February, replacing Jorge Quijano, who was in the position for seven years. Vásquez has more than 30 years of experience in financial and international capital market management, financial consulting and in the public sector, the canal authority said.

underscored that Mastercard has “suspended” and “not terminated” its agreements with the two Venezuelan banks, leaving open a possibility that the terms could be reached to resume normal activities. Venezuelan bank regulators have assigned teams to develop alternative payment processing systems, anticipating that U.S. sanctions will continue to disrupt transactions, the Associated Press has reported.

H&M Stops Buying Leather From Brazil Amid Deforestation

Fashion retailer H&M announced Thursday that it has halted purchases of Brazilian leather amid concerns that the cattle industry in the South American country has contributed to deforestation in the Amazon, The New York Times reported. “The ban will be active until there are credible assurance systems in place to verify that the leather does not contribute to environmental harm in the Amazon,” H&M said in a statement, Reuters reported. The announcement came amid a spike in rain forest fires this year in Brazil. Almost 50,000 fires have been detected this year in Brazil’s portion of the Amazon, the highest level in nearly a decade, The New York Times reported. The increases has coincided with policies backed by President Jair Bolsonaro to encourage greater access to land that has been under protection. The announcement by H&M followed last week’s move by apparel and footwear company VF Corporation to temporarily halt its purchases of leather from Brazil until its suppliers can determine that the leather is not related to any harm to the environment. It is not clear how much of Brazil’s leather exports are connected to deforestation. However, the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization said in a 2016 report that 80 percent of the deforestation in Brazil is related to cattle grazing. Bolsonaro’s policies have included cutting the budgets of environmental protection agencies, leading to criticism from world leaders. Last week, Bolsonaro signed an order to ban for 60 days the use of fire to clear land and also sent the military to fight fires in the Amazon.

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it occurs. The first objective must be to contain this fungus to its present location. Ecuador is active in establishing measures to keep the country TR4-free, and it is vital that all countries in the region work together to restrict the spread of this disease. Some countries in the region that already had TR4 emergency response plans have started implementing them, while others are putting procedures in place. It is essential that farmers and industry work very closely with governments. A FAO regional project has been initiated to ensure regional coordination and cooperation. National and regional responses must include the quarantine of infected areas, official restriction of the movement of banana material within and between countries, deployment of effective and practical emergency measures, establishment of TR4 research projects to identify effective management options and embarking on an extensive sensitization of the general public on the risks of the movement of banana materials.”

A Fernando García-Bastidas, researcher in the banana program at Keygene N.V. in the Netherlands: “The current TR4 pandemic is an extremely serious threat, as it affects not only Cavendish bananas but also other cultivars of other genetic groups, including plantains, which are staple food in the region. We reported and confirmed the presence of the pathogen in some farms in Colombia, and the pathogen has most likely spread to other areas. Colombia has declared a national emergency in an attempt to restrict the disease to the area where it was identified. The National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO) has started several activities, including enforcing prevention measurements and staff training actions. Checkpoints for vehicle-disinfection have been established at different points connecting cities, and more than 170 hectares of six farms that have been eradicated. However, due to the nature of the soil-borne fungus, it

is impossible to eradicate it when it’s present in soil. Prevention is currently the only major strategy to avoid new TR4 invasions. Farmers and exporters should consider every biosecurity recommendation that the NPPO established. I do not think the new outbreak in Colombia will affect the supply of fruits internationally, since the disease has not been reported further. However, we should not underestimate the impact of the current TR4 dissemination. Expansion and dissemination of this disease is difficult to stop. It is important to develop a global map on distribution of TR4 and other types associated to Panama disease in banana, as well as diagnostic tools that allow a rapid identification and enforce breeding programs to accelerate new options for the banana sector.”

A Randy C. Ploetz, professor emeritus at the University of Florida: “Cavendish, the primary variety of banana that is grown for the export trade, is susceptible to TR4 of the Panama disease pathogen. The susceptibility of Cavendish combined with the ease with which TR4 spreads make the outbreak in Colombia a serious threat to the future of the export trade in the region. The export sector is tremendously important in the economies of countries throughout the tropical Americas. For example, it is the most important commodity exported from Ecuador, Costa Rica, Panama and Belize, and the second- or third-most important from Colombia, Guatemala and Honduras. As TR4 spreads, it will not be possible to grow Cavendish in increasingly large areas in the region. Mitigation of this threat will be difficult, as there are no effective eradication or control measures. Effective fungicides do not exist, and the pathogen is adept at spreading and surviving in soil and water. Once a field is contaminated with TR4, production of Cavendish is no longer possible. Unfortunately, only less than ideal replacements for Cavendish are available for

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replanting contaminated sites. Economically acceptable TR4-resistant varieties should be produced, but it is presently unclear where and if funding for the development of such replacements will materialize.”

A **Rob Reeder, senior plant pathologist at CABI:** “TR4 has a much broader host range as compared to the previous Panama races and can attack previously resistant cultivars in the Cavendish subgroup. It can also infect plantains and other cultivars. There are no satisfactory methods to control the disease either in the plant or soil. Chemical control, crop rotation and the use of organic amendments have been tried but are generally ineffective. The best hope of sustainable control is strict sanitation and the use of resistant varieties. Removal of infected plants is an important first step in managing the disease, followed by strict farm sanitation to prevent its spread. Sanitation measures include: preventing movement of soil on farm machinery, tools and on the feet of animals and farm workers; preventing water-runoff; and disinfecting pruning materials between plants. Disease-free planting material must be used. TR4 is primarily a soil-borne disease and can spread over short distances via root-to-root contact and through contaminated soil. Spread can also occur from parent plants to suckers and in surface runoff. Farm sanitation is very important for managing the spread of the disease on the farm and more broadly within the country. Managing access to properties and training staff in hygiene management and early disease detection is vital to ensuring early identification and preventing disease introduction. The only long-term sustainable means of managing the disease is via resistant varieties. In areas where TR4 is established, it is prudent to introduce tolerant varieties such as the ‘Giant Cavendish’ tissue-culture variants lines from Taiwan—not fully resistant, but they are less susceptible than Cavendish

cultivars. Work is continuing to develop resistant Cavendish clones.”

A **Jorge Sauma, general manager, and Jorge Sandoval, research director, of National Banana Corporation (Corbana) in**

Costa Rica: “The banana wilt disease TR4 remains a threat to banana production in Latin American countries—the source of fruit and food for millions of people in the world and of jobs and income for countries. Today more than ever, collaboration among countries, open communication, coordination between agricultural health entities and the application of the scientific method, are top priorities. The advances of science today allow for more optimism and the belief that we will continue to produce and supply bananas. The number-one priority has been and continues to be having the strategies of exclusion, that is, to guarantee that the fungus does not reach Costa Rica or other countries in the area. Likewise, the commitment to have the contingency and containment in case it does spread are a necessity—which we have, in our case, though, of course, we continue to work every day to optimize contingency and containment. The rapid diagnosis of the disease, and acting calmly but rationally, will help us succeed. Costa Rica has been working on this since 2006, when the first alert reached corporate authorities. Together with the state’s phytosanitary service and the minister of agriculture, Corbana has developed training, awareness and action campaigns both at the researcher level and the at the producer/field worker level. We have worked and we continue to work intensively on the protocol of exclusion. We have promoted that the International Banana Congress not be held in banana countries, and it has been held in Miami for the last four years, where we have always dedicated a full day to this topic with the world’s leading specialists on the subject.”

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