



By Maura Maxwell

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Belize banana group reacts to Fyffes' pull-out



Meridian Farms says sudden withdrawal by the Irish multinational has resulted in hundreds of job losses

The owner of Belize's biggest banana producer has criticised Fyffes for its sudden decision to stop buying bananas from its farms because of its links with a local businessman said by the US authorities to be a drugs baron.

Earlier this week, the Irish Times reported that Fyffes would no longer purchase bananas from Mayan King because John Zabaneh has been acting as a spokesman for its owner Meridian Farms.

However David Gonzalez, director of Meridian Farms, accused the Irish multinational of acting irresponsibly.

"Fyffes announced...that they had severed ties with Meridian Farms in Belize because of involvement by a person designated by the Americans as a kingpin," he said. "What they failed to report is that the socially irresponsibly way that they did it caused people to lose their livelihoods in an instant."

Announcing that workers would be staging a protest in front of Fyffes' offices at the port of Big Creek today, Gonzalez told Fruitnet that he was trying to convince Fyffes to withdraw under a phase-out period to minimise the impact on farm workers. He claimed more than 600 workers and their families had been affected.

In 2012, the US treasury department named Zabaneh as a drugs trafficker with links to Mexican drugs baron Joaquín "Chapo" Guzman, his Sinaloa Cartel and Colombian suppliers. Under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, US citizens and organisations are banned from doing business with any person or company identified by the authorities.

Fyffes said it had cut ties with Zabaneh in 2012 as soon as he was named by the US authorities. But the multinational reinstated Mayan King as a supplier after it declared that Zabaneh was no longer involved in the business and that it had instead been taken over by Meridian Farms.

Zabaneh told local media that Fyffes had offered bridging loans to help the farm, which has been hit with cash flow problems following a severe drought, a claim that the multinational denies.

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