

For fresh fruit and vegetable marketing and distribution in Asia



By Maura Maxwell

Monday 7th October 2019, 10:30 GMT

FAO steps up fight against TR4

Scientific support, early detection and international collaboration are key to beating the disease



The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has launched an emergency project to curb major plant losses threatened by Fusarium wilt in a renewed effort to help protect banana crops in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Under the FAO's Technical Cooperation Programme, the project will work to fight the spread of the fungal disease, which can wipe out plantations of banana crops, upon which millions of people depend for their livelihoods.

FAO assistant chief and Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, Julio Berdegué, said: "the role of bananas in providing food and household income in this region cannot be understated".

According to the FAO, bananas are the most traded fresh fruit in the world, and the banana sector serves as an essential source of employment and income for thousands of rural households in developing countries.

Following July's discovery in Colombia of the Tropical Race 4 strain of Fusarium wilt, considered to be the world's greatest threat to banana production, the FAO warned that the possibility of the disease spreading "would have devastating impacts for farmers and their families across the region".

Bananas are of particular significance in some of the least developed and low-income countries, where beyond contributing to household food security, they generate income as a cash crop.

For some small farmers, banana crops account for 75 per cent of their total monthly income, according to the FAO. It warns that the fungus's ability to wipe out entire plantations could threaten critical food sources, household incomes and export revenues.

Though research is ongoing, there is no fully effective treatment of soil or plants to control or cure Fusarium disease. In

addition, fungal spores are able to lie dormant in soil for more than 30 years, and have proved resistant to fungicides.

To help eradicate the disease, the FAO has been providing technical assistance by way of diagnostics and identifying risk pathways. The agency recommends fortifying soil health and strengthening genetic resources to build resilience to the disease in the future.

Hans Dryer, who heads up FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division alerted countries to "be vigilant in monitoring and containing any TR4 cases".

"Only strict observation can prevent spreading, along with scientific support, early detection and international collaboration," he added.

Limiting the spreading of disease, raising awareness, engaging with farmers and developing disease recovery programmes are some of the

concrete efforts FAO is implementing to mend the issue.

A global network on TR4 under the World Banana Forum is under way to help coordinate further technical advice from specialists.

In addition, the International Plant Protection Convention recently held a workshop in Colombia on plant health best practices to prevent spread of the disease.