

UN and partners launch campaign to tackle new fungus strain threatening world's bananas

The world's most traded fruit is being threatened by a new, "insidious" fungus strain that poses risks to banana production and could cause vast commercial losses or even greater damage to the 400 million people who rely on bananas as a staple food or source of income, the United Nations agriculture agency warned Wednesday.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has launched with its partners – Bioversity International, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and World Banana Forum – a global programme requiring \$98 million to contain and manage the new Tropical Race 4 strain (TR4strain) of Fusarium wilt, an insidious disease that can last for years in soils and can hitchhike to new fields and destinations through various means, such as infected planting materials, water, shoes, farm tools and vehicles.

"This is a [major threat to banana production](#) in several regions of the world," said Hans Dreyer, Director of FAO's Plant Production and Protection Division, in a news statement.

Fusarium wilt TR4 was first detected in Southeast Asia in the 1990s and has now been identified at 19 sites in 10 countries – including the Near East, South Asia and Mozambique in sub-Saharan Africa.

"We need to move quickly to prevent its further spread from where it is right now and to support already affected countries in their efforts to cope with the disease," he emphasized.

Without a coordinated intervention, scientists estimate that by 2040, the disease could affect up to 1.6 million hectares of banana lands, representing one-sixth of the current global production, valued at about \$10 billion annually. The programme is initially targeting 67 countries, aiming to reduce the potentially affected area by up to 60 per cent.

"The long-term resilience of banana production systems can only be improved through continuous monitoring, robust containment strategies, strengthening national capacities and enhancing international collaboration to deploy integrated disease management approaches," Mr. Dreyer explained.

The five-year programme is designed to build on existing initiatives tackling the disease and strengthen local technical capacities. It will also support developing science-based technologies and tools through researching the fungus' biology and epidemiology, its detection and the development of resistant cultivars, among other things.

For areas where the disease is not present or first appears, inspection,

surveillance and rapid response measures will be developed. Where it already occurs, improved and integrated disease management techniques will be developed along with the search for and deployment of resistant varieties.

If effectively rolled out, it is estimated that every dollar invested in the programme today will produce benefits of between \$98 and \$196 in 20 years' time, according to FAO.

More on Fusarium wilt TR4

The [fungus](#) is caused by a new variant of the disease that had decimated Gros Michel banana type plantations in the early 20th century, causing more than \$2 billion in damages and leading to its replacement with the Cavendish variety, which though resistant to the earlier strain has now succumbed to the new TR4 race.

The TR4 – which so far has impacted nearly 100,000 hectares according to estimations of scientists, which accounts for around half the bananas grown today, but also other cultivars that constitute key nutritional staples.