

Ecuadorian small banana growers are still waiting for government-funded sprays to protect their fruit against the ubiquitous black sigatoka fungus, website *Telegrafo.com.ec* reported.



Plantation owners in the El Oro, Guayas and Manabí provinces have confirmed they have been waiting for treatment for more than two months after the government's pledge to help them.

The government declared it would offer plantation owners of 10 hectares or less free spray applications as part of an emergency package to deal with falling banana prices.

Agriculture Minister Javier Ponce, said the chemicals had already arrived and were being distributed to farmers through existing partnerships.

But growers in El Oro said they were concerned because the spraying program was yet to start in their province. Producers are sceptical about whether the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture and Fisheries (MAGAP) will fulfill its promise.

One of the largest growing areas Machala Agricultural Centre, in El Oro province, which has 400 farms has said it is still waiting for payment for its fruit.

Earlier in the year the government announced it would buy some export quality bananas from growers in a bid to stop prices falling on the open market below the official US\$5.50 per box due to oversupply.

Machala Agricultural Centre chief Paúl González, has asked the government to try and pay farmers within the next few days.

He also expressed concern about the delay in treating bananas against black sigatoka fungus.

"We are entering the fifth week and not a single hectare of bananas has been sprayed. We should have had two cycles of application already by now," he was reported as saying.

He warned that the emergency plan was in danger of total failure because it had not been treated seriously.

MAGAP's provincial director in El Oro Jorge Chamaidán, said his department had intensified its work to pay farmers more quickly.

"Since last week we have been working overtime, even until dawn, to help producers," he was quoted as saying.

In a press statement he said 285,000 bunches of bananas had been bought in El Oro at US\$3 per bunch so far, with 200 Orenses growers receiving payment and credits starting to clear accounts since last Friday.

He added that during the first week of payments US\$465,000 had been paid to banana producers and associations in Guayas, El Oro and Los Rios provinces.

Orenses Banana Growers Association spokesman Jorge Toapanta, said even if they received payment tomorrow from the Agricultural Ministry, it would still be a failure.

He said the government had accepted his demand for payment to be received eight days after purchase instead of 15 as delays "discouraged" farmers.

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