

Latin America's biggest banana-growing countries are taking action to prevent the entrance of Fusarium Wilt Tropical Race IV (TR4), which is suspected to be present on two farms in Colombia.

Meanwhile, Colombian authorities and banana associations on Thursday said that they have been working tirelessly to "rigorously implement" measures to control the spread of the devastating and highly contagious disease. So far they have destroyed dozens of hectares of land in La Guajira.

If in August TR4 is confirmed to be present in Colombia, it could wreak havoc on plantations throughout the world's biggest banana-exporting region. Two farms, Eva Norte and Don Marce - the latter of which supplies organic bananas to Dole - covering 150 hectares in the north of the country were quarantined in mid-June.



In a statement today, the Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA), the Banana Growers'

Association of Magdalena and La Guajira (ASBAMA), and the Colombian Banana Growers' Association (AUGURA) said they are working around the clock to safeguard the industry.

"At ICA we have spared no human or technical effort to tackle this suspected detection, there are more than 50 officials working 24 hours a day seven days a week to manage the situation," said ICA general manager Deyanira Barrero León.

"We have the support of international experts from the Netherlands, Brasil and Australia, as well as organizations like Bioverity International.

"We call on all growers to bolster their biosecurity measures on their farms to prevent the spread of this fungus if its presence is confirmed."

Two more farm blocks have now been quarantined, in addition to the four blocks announced a few days ago. So far 75 hectares of farmland have been "eradicated", and ICA says it plans to double that figure by the end of the week.

Authorities have also established seven control points and have strictly limited movement around the affected farm area. Biosecurity at port of entry into the country has also been bolstered, and the entrance of some plant material has been restricted.

Meanwhile, AUGURA president Emerson Aguirre Medina says the association has trained thousands of people around the country so they correctly implement the necessary biosecurity protocols.



ASBAMA president José Francisco Zúñiga said the country's banana industry "is united in combatting TR4".

"It must be made clear that this is a fungus that can be controlled, which is why production

and exports of bananas won't be impacted. All companies associated with ASBAMA - which represents 80% of banana production on the northern coastal area - have taken extreme prevention measures and trained all their employees," he said.

"If it is confirmed, then work between growers, ICA and the Agriculture Ministry will be a fundamental factor to tackle it."

Response from other Latin American countries

If confirmed, the presence of TR4 in Colombia would not only be a huge concern for domestic banana growers, but also for countries elsewhere in Latin America. Neighboring Ecuador is the world's largest banana exporter, while Central American countries including Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama also rank in the top 10.

Richard Salazar, executive director of the Ecuadorian Banana Exporters' and Marketers' Association (Acorbanec) told FreshFruitPortal.com that the country has activated all the alerts and contingency plans it had.

"Measures have been implemented in the ports, airports and borders," he said, explaining that pediluvies had been installed for passengers, along with measures to fumigate planes and trucks. The entrance of plant material has also been restricted.

Numerous farms have also implemented biosecurity measures and growers are being trained on how they should be applied. An important aspect is controlling who enters the production sites, according to Salazar.

The Ecuadorian Government has announced a US\$18 million fund to safeguard the banana industry, which will partly be used to help find TR4-resistant varieties.

Meanwhile, Panama, which borders Colombia to the north, has also limited the entry of plant material that could be contaminated and has put out a phytosanitary alert.

Oleght Aguilar, national director of plant health of Panama's Agricultural Development Ministry (MIDA), said that the country had a couple of weeks ago suspected farms in Colombian had been quarantined over fears that TR4 was present.

He noted that a major challenge for Panama is the mountainous and heavily forested border between the two countries. It is frequently used as a crossing by illegal immigrants, which is an issue as there are no control points.

In addition, there is a large amount of trade between the two countries through the Caribbean and Pacific ports, increasing the risk of the disease spreading.

In Panama, strict measures have also been taken in ports, airports and at points of entry.

He also highlighted the country's responsibility in ensuring the disease does not spread to the rest of Central America, given its location.

"We are the point that concerns the rest of Central America the most, because we are the place through which the whole continent's banana production could be affected," he said. Other countries were therefore working closely with Panama, he said.

Another Central American country, Guatemala, has implemented controls on all points of entry into the country and has set an 'elevated' state of alert.

Julio Mérida, executive director of the Guatemalan Association of Independent Banana Growers (APIB), said that the country had banned the import of anything related to the banana industry from Colombia, from plant material to tools used on farms.

Ships and containers arriving in the country's ports are also being disinfected, as well as nearby traffic.

Mérida noted the importance of bananas to the Guatemalan economy. In 2018, they were the country's leading agricultural export.