

Colombia hopes to boost its banana exports by 10 percent this year, which would bring in \$1 billion in income for the world's fifth-largest producer of the fruit, an industry official cited by Reuters said on Wednesday.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic and the presence of the Fusarium wilt Tropical race IV (TR4) banana fungus that was detected in July 2019, Colombia exported 109 million 20-kilogram boxes of bananas last year, up 9.3% from 2019, boosting earnings by 6.5% to \$916.2 million, said Emerson Aguirre, president of the Colombian Banana Growers Association.

"Although the banana industry was blighted by these two pandemics, our figures were positive versus 2019," Aguirre told Reuters, adding that the export target for 2021 was 120 million 20-kg boxes.

Higher output followed greater productivity per hectare versus 2019, as well as better weather in the first half of the year in Uraba, Colombia's principle banana-growing region.

Production per hectare rose to 2,134 boxes per hectare, 173 more boxes than in 2019.

Challenges for the sector this year include boosting productivity per hectare to that of other producers such as Ecuador, Costa Rica and Guatemala, which reach close to 3,000 boxes per hectare, Aguirre said.

Regarding the TR4 detection, Aguirre said: "The containment carried out has been effective. He added that in 2020 the fungus did not spread to other provinces and that control efforts would continue this year.