

Jamaica bans sale of citrus plants to control pest

July 6 2011, By DAVID McFADDEN , Associated Press

(AP) -- Jamaica has shuttered all citrus nurseries across the tropical country to try and check an invasive pest that carries a fast-spreading bacteria capable of devastating its \$43 million commercial industry, officials said Tuesday.

Jamaica's ministry of agriculture announced that all nurseries were closed until further notice and the sale of plants were prohibited to control the spread of the incurable "[citrus greening](#)" disease, which has hobbled citrus production in parts of China and infested millions of dead and dying trees in Florida and Brazil.

"If the disease is not managed, it can have very severe [repercussions](#)," said Alfred Barrett, program manager of the Jamaica Citrus Protection Agency. "So we're hoping that by closing the nurseries within the vector we can get it under control."

But with nearly 5,300 citrus farmers, nearly 5,000 of whom tend to plots of 10 acres (4 hectares) or less, stopping the spread of the blighting disease in mountainous Jamaica will be difficult. There are only eight large farmers with [citrus groves](#) of over 250 acres (101 hectares), according to Barrett.

The disease, officially known by its Chinese name, huanglongbing, or "yellow dragon disease" for its visual effect on leaves, is now found in all 14 Jamaican parishes, according to Shelia Harvey, the government's chief produce inspector.

Percy Miller of Jamaica Citrus Growers Limited, which has processed, packed and marketed citrus products since 1951, asserted the closure of the country's open-air nurseries will prove futile and thousands of small farmers might be driven to trade on the black market just to survive.

"The disease is already out there so this is an exercise in futility. This one-size-fits all approach just won't work in Jamaica. If you close down the nurseries, you are in for one heck of a nose dive," Miller said.

Miller pointed out that it takes about a year and a half to produce a certified citrus plant in Jamaica.

"So if you close the nurseries down today, actual plants won't come available to the industry until about 18 months from now at the very quickest. Essentially all you are doing is driving it underground," he said.

Barrett acknowledged the closure will be hard on some farmers, but he stressed that if the island does not properly manage the problem the industry could face serious decreases in productivity, reduced earnings from exports, and shortage of fruits for local consumption.

"This problem will end up transforming the way we grow citrus. We will now have to actively manage a grove to get production out of it," he said.

Citrus greening, which is spread by an aphid-like insect called the Asian citrus psyllid, leaves fruit sour, malformed and unusable and eventually kills the tree. More than two decades of research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has not yet revealed genetic or biological controls.

The disease, which Barrett said has also been detected in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, has been particularly devastating because it takes years for citrus trees to reach peak production, and the disease targets young trees, making it difficult for growers to replace those that have

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