

Call for action in Nature to save the banana

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Panama disease.

For years, Panama disease has attacked banana plantations in Southeast Asia. After a recent outbreak in Jordan, the first outside of Asia, the devastating disease is now also present in Mozambique. Stephan Weise of Bioversity International and Gert Kema of Wageningen UR (University & Research centre) raised their concerns about the threat of

Panama disease and the lack of funds to tackle the problem. They call for concerted action in the scientific journal *Nature* to prevent further dissemination of Panama disease that has destroyed thousands of hectares of banana plantations. Time is pressing.

History should not repeat itself. In the 1950s, Latin American banana plantations producing the popular banana Gros Michel were wiped out by Panama disease, caused by the soil-borne fungus *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *cubense*. The disease cannot be cured and controlling it is extremely complicated. The epidemic caused huge economic damage and had devastating consequences for the livelihoods of millions of banana workers and producers.

Fortunately, the Panama disease problem was solved by deploying a new and resistant banana variety: Cavendish. This gradually replaced Gros Michel and currently dominates the global export trade and many domestic markets. Cavendish banana remained resistant for decades, but in 1992 a more aggressive strain of the *Fusarium* fungus was discovered. This strain, also known as Tropical Race 4 (TR4) has spread throughout Southeast Asia, where it ravaged thousands of hectares over the past years.

Now, the fungus has made a transcontinental leap into the Middle East and Africa, infecting Cavendish [bananas](#) in Jordan and Mozambique. This bangs on doors of international quarantine offices and seems to be the prelude to a new era of global Panama disease threats. Gert Kema, scientist at Wageningen UR: "I am incredibly concerned that it will soon pop up in Latin America."

The World Banana Forum, a multi-stakeholder platform of the banana industry whose Secretariat is hosted by the FAO, recently launched a TR4 Task Force to save the banana as the livelihoods and food security of millions of producers and small-holders are threatened. Luud Clercx,

from the TASTE Foundation (Technical Assistance for Sustainable Trade & Environment), coordinates the group and agrees that "Global efforts are urgently needed on training and capacity building to safeguard banana production." Wageningen UR coordinates several multidisciplinary public-private partnerships to combat Panama disease. But according to Kema, more action is needed: "Given the TR4 outbreaks, nothing is enough. More action is urgently required."

More information: "Pathogens: Appeal for funds to fight banana blight." Gert H. J. Kema, Stephan Weise. *Nature* 504, 218 (12 December 2013) [DOI: 10.1038/504218b](https://doi.org/10.1038/504218b). Published online 11 December 2013

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