

## MARKETS

### REPORT

—Bananas

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The time is five to 12 for the Philippine banana industry, cautions Paul Smits of NEH Philippines, which manages over 1,500ha of banana plantations in the country and exports to markets in Asia and the Middle East. "Black Sigatoka, Panama disease Foc4 and other diseases are threatening the livelihoods of Philippine banana growers," he says. "Production per hectare, leaf condition, net bunch weight and Class A fruit recovery have been severely affected, and with that the income of growers."

Disease has become a pressing issue of late for the Philippine banana industry due largely to an increase in infections of the fungal disease Fusarium wilt. Commonly known as Panama disease, it has long been the scourge of the global banana industry and single-handedly brought an end to large-scale production of the Gros Michel variety that constituted the bulk of Latin American exports until the middle of last century.

Following the demise of the Gros Michel, producers were forced to shift to resistant cultivars of the Cavendish variety. Panama disease, however, has proven equally adaptable and a new strain called tropical race 4 (Foc4) has emerged. Stephen Antig, executive director of the Pilipino Banana Growers and Exporters Association (PBGEA), says that Foc4 poses an increased threat due to the changing nature of the industry there. "The threat of Panama disease has been with us since early 2000, but we have always been able to control the spread of outbreaks with our control and eradication measures," he says.



These measures have been less effective recently as the number of small- to medium-sized plantations increases – a result of government assistance and increased support from international funding organisations. "Small growers who are not members of our industry association have

# United we stand, divided we wilt

DAVAO CITY—With production fragmenting in the Philippines, the banana industry there will have to pull together to combat the rise of Fusarium wilt.

by Rob Hay

***"We have activities lined up to teach the small growers how to identify, control and eradicate affected areas"***

been hit by this disease and they do not know how to contain it," explains Antig. "The problem is some of these farms are adjacent to our members' plantations. Therefore if we don't do something about it chances are it will infect our member's farms."

The Philippine government has recognised the threat to the industry by allocating 250m pesos (US\$5.8m) in funding to combat the disease. Antig believes this figure is adequate to take initial steps towards preventing its spread. "We have activities lined up to teach the small growers how to identify, control and eradicate affected areas. Part of the funding will also be used to install footbaths and other quarantine facilities."

The government will also distribute Foc4-free seedlings to independent farmers and is backing the creation of a banana research centre. Smits says information sharing and collaboration are vital to stopping the

spread of the disease. "We believe we can overcome these challenges by working together with world-class institutes, which have a proven record in innovating agricultural crops." He points to an agreement between Wageningen University and Plant Research International, as an example of this (see p18-19).

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**LEFT**—Foc4 is present in the yellow areas of the map

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