



Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries

**Statement by
Hon. Audley Shaw, CD, MP
Minister of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture and Fisheries
Media Briefing on TR4 and Frosty Pod Rot Diseases
2nd Floor Conference Room, MICAF, Hope Gardens
Wednesday, October 9, 2019,
10:30 a.m.**

Salutations

- PS Spence
- Chief Technical Director, Dr. Roy McNeil
- Sanniell Wilson. Chief Plant Quarantine Officer
- Janet Conie, CEO, The Banana Board
- Representatives from all stakeholder agencies
- Farmers
- Members of the Media

Yesterday, I made a fulsome presentation in the Houses of Parliament concerning the potential threat of the Tropical Race 4 Disease and Jamaica's preparations and state of readiness to implement preventative measures to safeguard the local banana and plantain industry from this disease.

As reinforced in the short YouTube video, this is a deadly disease, with the capacity to destroy our entire industry and it is for that reason that through our Competent Authority, The Plant Quarantine and Produce Inspection Branch as well as The Banana Board and other stakeholders such as other border regulatory agencies that we are acting swiftly to do everything in our powers to prevent it from entering Jamaica.

I have therefore called this press briefing today to provide additional information and the opportunity for clarification and feedback on the threat of the TR4 disease.

In addition, and as I indicated in my presentation yesterday, I also wish to address the matter of the Frosty Pod Rot of Cocoa, which is one of the main plant health issues now facing the country.

Tropical Race 4/ Fusarium Wilt Disease

But, before I come to the Frosty Pod Rot matter, let me first detail some of the measures being implemented to address the threat of the TR4 Disease

Among the prevention measures to be implemented are:

1. Recognition and classification of the *Fusarium* wilt/ TR4 Disease as a regional threat. – **Already Done**
2. Strengthening of border protection capabilities at airports and sea ports such as installation of disinfecting mats for persons and disinfecting chambers for used motor vehicles and containers. –

Partially Done; Mats not yet installed, Container disinfection not yet in place

3. Interception of contraband banana, plantain and Heliconia plant parts at sea during interventions by marine police for drugs and ensuring that persons are checked. – **In progress**
4. Prohibition of the importation of banana/plantain plants, plantlets, any part of the banana plant and Heliconia from countries which have the disease or are suspected of having the disease. – **Already Done**
5. Request for in vitro tissue culture plants to be accompanied by certificates for disease indexing. **In progress**
6. Training of plant health officials, scientists, extension officers, border control and quarantine officers and producers on TR4 identification and management. – **Under way**
7. Development of a protocol - Persons who visit banana/plantain fields in countries with TR4 must leave clothes/shoes in that country.
Unless extremely necessary, persons should refrain from visiting infected farms. – **In Progress**
8. Conduct widespread awareness sessions for agronomists, extension officers, plant health officers, farmers, custom officers, coast guard officers and all technicians in the agricultural sector and the general public. – **In Progress**

9. Conduct simulation exercises under different conditions (before the disease is discovered) for containment when the disease is identified.

To be done

10. Increase capabilities for surveillance and diagnostics – **In progress**

11. Mounting informational posters in the international airports and distributing posters, brochures and other information materials in the agricultural communities – **In progress**

12. Updating of the contingency and action plan – **Done**

13. Securing funds or financial resources to address phytosanitary emergencies.

Control Measures

These are among the foremost steps to be implemented to prevent the disease from entering Jamaica. The action plan also identifies the specific resources that are currently available:

- 1) Tolerant and resistant varieties at The Banana Board Breeding Station at Bodles, Old Harbour. The FHIA varieties such as FHIA 01 and 25 have shown high tolerance to Race 4.
- 2) A diagnostic laboratory has been established at The Banana Board to conduct the preliminary diagnosis of Race 4.
- 3) Tissue culture bio-factory has been established at The Banana Board to produce disease-free planting material.
- 4) Scientists at The Banana Board have been trained to identify the disease and carry out molecular diagnostics.

5) Scientists at The Banana Board have been trained in the management of TR4.

National Task Force

In order to continuously monitor our Prevention Programme, we are appointing a national task force to be chaired by The Banana Board and to include representatives from the border regulatory agencies, including the Plant Quarantine Division, Customs, JDF Coast Guard, Marine Police, Airport Authority, RADA, All Island Banana Growers Association, IICA, FAO, farmers, the police and other relevant stakeholders.

Plant health is a fundamental pillar for achieving the level of production and productivity needed for Jamaica's food security and economic growth and its importance cannot be overemphasized.

Unfortunately, we have seen an increase of pests over the last 10-15 years, perhaps exacerbated by the impact of climate change.

Frosty Pod Rot of Cocoa

As you may be aware, this disease has been impacting our country since 2016. Let me assure you today, that we are well on our way to treating definitively with this disease.

You may recall that in response to concerns raised by farmers and other stakeholders, I ordered the shutdown of the Frosty Pod Rot (FPR) project to facilitate a review.

A team of my technocrats and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) also visited Colombia to see how a country that has had the disease for over 100 years is managing. We also visited Peru, which is similarly afflicted.

I am assuring the country today that Jamaica is on the right track in managing this disease and, in fact, in areas where management has been implemented, we are seeing an 87% increase in the production yield of cocoa with a further projected increase of 50% for the fall crop. So, at this point I am ordering the full resumption of the activities under the Frosty Pod Rot management project.

We are therefore asking our farmers to bear with us and allow our officers entry to your farms to carry out the necessary intervention measures.

And, I am making this appeal in light of some concerning reports I have received that our farmers are resisting the efforts of my team to enter their farms to carry out their duties.

We all need to work together to secure the full resuscitation of Jamaica's valuable cocoa industry.

Overview of the Cocoa Industry and its decline over the years

Jamaica's cocoa has all the attributes that contribute to it being recognized by the International Cocoa Organization (ICCO) as one of eight cocoa with 100 per cent exclusive 'Fine Flavoured' status among cocoa producing countries in the world.

At present there is an estimated 3,250 hectares of cocoa cultivation across three distinct agro-ecological zones, however, only 1,300 hectares are actively in production with the remaining 1,950 being classified as abandoned. At the same time, it is estimated that there are about 1,300 active cocoa farmers.

Between 2004 and 2018 Jamaica's cocoa production averaged approximately 368 tonnes annually, however, the last five years of that period saw an annual average of approximately 255 tonnes. In fact, the actual production for 2018 was 121 tonnes, which is below the last five-year average.

Extreme weather conditions - hurricanes, floods and drought have contributed to the decline. Given that Jamaica has produced over 2,000 tonnes of cocoa during the 1980's these are not encouraging figures. Of the total volume of cocoa produced annually, 90% are exported, mainly to Europe.

Other factors have also negatively impacted Jamaica's cocoa industry and we note the concerns of the farmers regarding timeliness and adequacy of payment.

Significant efforts have therefore been made to address the issues that have been causing discouragement to the production process. In this regard, the price per box of cocoa delivered to the fermentaries was increased to J\$3,000 per box, with effect from the new cocoa crop year October 1, 2019.

Some farmers have also complained about the non-receipt of payment after months/years, however, from as far back as March 2018 the Government made sure to settle all outstanding payments to those cocoa farmers who were owed by the former Cocoa Industry Board (CIB).

These concerns and issues have affected the spread of the Frosty Pod Rot Disease. The inability of farmers to adequately reinvest because of the low returns on their investment gave rise to the following:

- 1) Loss of interest by farmers
- 2) Lack of continuity from parental generation to the younger generation
- 3) Ageing farmer population
- 4) Abandonment of farms

The Frosty Pod Rot Management Programme

Under the Frosty Pod Rot Management Programme, approximately 225 hectares of cocoa have been pruned, benefitting 187 farmers, principally in St. Mary. The total acreage projected for treatment in eastern Jamaica has not yet been completed; however, baseline data collection has been initiated in Clarendon. We are, however, projecting an increase in production for the 2019/2020 production cycle.

The prevailing situation of farmer inactivity, lack of vigilance, and poor farming practices provided the suitable environment for the development and disbursement of the Frosty Pod Rot disease upon its arrival in Jamaica.

The abandonment of farms due to farmer discouragement was the exact scenario faced by the cocoa industry in both Colombia and Peru when the disease was identified in those countries for the very first time.

The fact of the matter is that we need the cooperation of the farmers to stem the spread of the disease.

Frosty pod is an air borne disease that can be easily spread from one farm to another by way of wind movements. Farmers are therefore expected to adopt the recommendations of the FPR project and apply the appropriate cultural practices and chemical interventions after the fields have been treated by PQD teams to reduce the reoccurrence and spread of this disease.

Unfortunately Plant Quarantine members have been threatened and, in some cases, barred from entering farmers' holdings due to miscommunication and the misconception that the team was on a mission to eradicate and destroy their cocoa orchards. These incidences occurred mainly in Clarendon with a few isolated cases in St. Mary.

Improved Performance

In spite of these challenges, we are already witnessing an improved performance in the sector. For the first week of cocoa collection for the new crop year, which began on October 1 this year, one fermentary has seen 400 boxes of wet cocoa beans being delivered by farmers.

Government's Plans for the sector

The Government, through JACRA, is working to strengthen the Food Management System (FMS) along the cocoa value chain in order to improve cocoa quality and provide traceability from field to table. This will make our cocoa become even more marketable as chocolatiers are demanding safer foods that are free from pesticides, heavy metals and mineral oil hydrocarbons.

Efforts are being undertaken to develop the Jamaican Cocoa of Excellence competition amongst farmers, with a view to develop the local value-added sector for chocolate.

Activities are in progress for the provision of the appropriate genetic planting materials to provide the industry with planting materials that are tolerant to the Frosty Pod Rot disease.

In particular, we are now embarking on following three-pronged approach:

First, Farmer Field Schools are to be organised to engage willing farmers to upgrade their fields and educate them on Good Agricultural Practices to control the disease.

Second, we will have four nurseries around the cocoa growing parishes to deliver superior grafted plants that are tolerant to FPR, to be underplanted in existing fields. As the superior plants grow, the old seedlings will be gradually removed so that productivity and revenue can increase from 15 boxes per acre of beans to 60 boxes. Farmers who participate in the Farmer Field schools and are registered with RADA would be eligible for the grafted plants

Third, we need to ensure that the Plant Quarantine Branch removes cocoa trees from abandoned fields that will continually infect the fields that the farmers are struggling to maintain.

And, Government will continue to work with stakeholders to maintain a satisfactory price per box to cocoa farmers that will keep them motivated and interested in cultivating cocoa.

In closing, let me thank all our stakeholders who continue to work tirelessly to support and expand the agricultural sector and, in particular, the cocoa and banana sectors, which we have dealt with today.

I am aware that sometimes there are different viewpoints regarding the nuts and bolts of plant health management.

I have sat down with my team from the Plant Quarantine Branch and I am satisfied that they have proceeded professionally in their actions and will continue to work with other stakeholders to address the current plant health issues we face.

Again, I appeal to all Jamaicans to support us in these efforts to contain plant diseases.