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Department
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State of Hawaii

NEWS RELEASE

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Update on Eradication of Banana Bunchy Top from the Big Island

"Project Eradication," an effort to eliminate a very serious banana disease, the Banana Bunchy Top Virus (BBTV) is progressing. The project which calls for the removal of all banana plants in the North Kona District on the Big Island was launched on January 15, 1999.

"The response from the community has been unbelievable and the majority of residences we have visited thus far have been very cooperative understanding the need to take out all banana plants to preserve the future ability to grow bananas in our backyards, as well as commercially," said project leader Guy Nagai, State Department of Agriculture Noxious Weed Specialist.

"Since the launching of Project Eradication, the Department has received more than 200 calls from concerned residents, many of whom are asking when we will be coming to remove their banana plants. That's not to say that we haven't had a few people who have been in opposition to having their banana plants treated and destroyed."

Thus far, the Department has had to take legal action against one part-time resident, Richard Mayer, who refused entry onto his property for the removal of all banana plants. On Thursday, March 18, District Judge Joseph Florendo Jr. granted a search warrant which allowed Department personnel to enter, treat, and destroy 173 banana plants growing at his residence.

As for the area impacted, the virus is still believed to be contained to a 10 square mile infestation zone in the North Kona District between Palani Junction and Donkey Mill Road in Keauhou mauka. An estimated 1600 homes and 3 commercial farms are believed to have banana plants within the infestation zone. The Department responded to about 50 reports of possible diseased plants located outside of the infestation zone, all of which tested to be free of BBTV.

The method of removing this serious disease from the Big Island is modeled after a strategy used in a successful eradication project in Kilauea, on Kauai involving herbicide treatment and destruction of all banana plants within an infestation zone. The removal of all banana plants is necessary to prevent the spread of the disease, especially because newly infected plants may show no symptoms. With the removal of all host plants, the virus cannot be spread by a tiny insect called the banana aphid which feeds on diseased banana plants and relocates and infects healthy banana plants.

Project Eradication is still on schedule with replanting of disease-free banana keikis slated to occur in January, 2000, given no delays.

Big Island residents living outside the zone are still being asked to report any banana plants with disease-like symptoms. Infected plants are stunted and produce small, deformed fruits. In advanced stages of the disease, plants do not produce any fruit. The younger leaves of an infected plant are stunted resulting in a bunchy appearance at the top of the plant. The edges of the leaf are yellowish and may curl upward. Early signs of an infected plant may show dark green streaks on the back of the stem portion of leaves.

State law prohibits the movement of banana plants and plant parts from Oahu and the North Kona District on the Big Island -- BBTV infested areas -- to uninfested areas of the Big Island and other neighbor islands. Anyone caught moving banana plants and plant parts from infested areas can face fines between \$100 and \$10,000 per violation.

For more information on Project Eradication, or to report any infected banana plant, Big Island residents are urged to contact their nearest State Department of Agriculture Office at (808)323-4565 (Kona Office) or (808)974-4140 (Hilo Office).

For further details contact: Guy Nagai, Department of Agriculture Noxious Weed Specialist and project leader at (808) 323-4565.

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