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Department
of Agriculture
State of Hawaii

NEWS RELEASE

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Final "Push" to Eradicate Serious Banana Disease from Kona

The State Department of Agriculture is conducting a final "push" to eradicate the banana bunchy top virus (BBTV) from Kona on the Big Island. The target is to treat and destroy all banana plants in a 10 square mile infestation zone in North Kona District by the end of this year.

"Eradicating BBTV from Kona is critical in preventing the spread of this serious disease of banana to the eastside of the island, where the state's major banana producing area lies," said Department of Agriculture Chairperson James J. Nakatani.

"Project Eradication began at the start of the year and more than 400 property owners have been very cooperative resulting in the destruction of nearly 40,000 banana plants. But progress is not fast enough, so the Department has dedicated more staff to complete the project."

In an effort to destroy all diseased plants in the infested area, an additional 15 department workers have been selected to canvas homes and treat any banana plants located on those properties. The department estimates approximately 800 more households have banana plants that need to be destroyed.

Banana plants are killed by puncturing the trunk with a screwdriver and injecting the plants with a herbicide, Roundup Ultra. Within couple of weeks from treatment, plants wither and die. Property owners have been asked to keep the withering plants on their property until the materials have completely decomposed so that infected materials are not moved to uninfested areas.

A serious viral disease of banana plants, BBTV was discovered on Oahu in 1989; Kailua-Kona, Hawaii in 1995; and Kilauea, Kauai in 1997. It has since been declared eradicated from Kilauea, Kauai in December, 1998 following a similar eradication effort in which all banana plants in a BBTV infestation zone were destroyed. On Oahu, BBTV is too widespread and eradication is not a feasible solution.

Infected banana plants are stunted and produce small, deformed fruits. In advanced stages of the disease, plants do not produce any fruit. Infected banana plants are useless and serve only as a source of the virus. A tiny insect called the banana aphid spreads the disease by carrying the virus to healthy plants after feeding on infected plants. Since there is no cure for BBTV, in order to eradicate the disease all banana plants within the infestation zone — whether showing symptoms or not — must be destroyed in order to eliminate both the aphid vector and the virus host (banana plants). Keep in mind that newly infected or tolerant banana plants may not show symptoms but may still carry the virus. The most common method of spreading the disease is with people moving and planting infected banana plants.

A quarantine is in place prohibiting the movement of banana plants and plant parts from Oahu, and the North Kona and South Kona Districts of the island of Hawaii — infested BBTV areas — to other islands and localities within the state. Violation of this rule may result in fines between \$100 to \$10,000.

On the Big Island, if you have any questions about the eradication project or suspect that your banana plants may be infected with BBTV, please contact the Department of Agriculture at 974-4140 (Hilo Office).

Media contact: for photo opportunities or questions on Project Eradication, contact the Department's Project Leader Guy Nagai at (808)651-1672.

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