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NEWS

Uganda 'needs biotech law' to save banana sector

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[KAMPALA] An official in Uganda's agriculture ministry has expressed concern that policymakers are not keeping pace with scientific efforts to control a disease threatening the country's main cash crop.

Opolot Okasai, commissioner for crop production and marketing, told SciDev.Net yesterday (10 October) that banana bacterial wilt could cost Uganda US\$6-8 billion in the next 5-10 years.

Uganda's National Agricultural Research Organisation and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture are working together to develop a transgenic banana that can resist the disease.

Okasai says the scientists are likely to achieve this in the next few years. But the transgenic bananas will not reach Ugandan farmers until regulations are put in place.

"There is no sign that our parliament will enact a law to allow, oversee and protect biotechnology," he says.

The bacterial wilt is highly destructive, wiping out up to 90 per cent of bananas on many of the farms affected by recent outbreaks.

It arrived in Uganda in 2001 and spread rapidly to nearly all banana-growing regions. Since then it has also reached the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Tanzania.

The disease is currently under control in ten districts in southwestern Uganda, thanks to communities sterilising farm equipment and a ban on the transport of banana planting material between districts, says Okasai.

But according to Okasai: "The most effective way to combat the disease is via genetic engineering. This calls for an expedited legal and policy environment to put into effect the scientific solutions visibly coming up."

Ugandan and Belgian scientists have already genetically modified bananas to resist another serious disease called black sigatoka. They plan to test them in confined trials at facilities being constructed at the Kawanda Agricultural Research Institute.

"We expect results from this research to contribute immensely to the scientific fight against banana bacterial wilt," says Arthur Makara a biosafety desk officer at Uganda National Council for Science and



Bananas infected with banana bacterial wilt
Eric Boa, Global Plant Clinic

Technology.

<http://www.scidev.net/en/news/uganda-needs-biotech-law-to-save-banana-sector.html>

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