



Castries St. Lucia, Thursday February 25th, 2010. An agriculture official at the OECS Secretariat says the presence of the black sigatoka fungus in some OECS Member countries can seriously decrease the value of the Agriculture Industry to the economies of Member States.

Agriculture Economist at the OECS Secretariat George Alcee says the black sigatoka is more aggressive than the yellow sigatoka and can cause a reduction in yield of up to 50 % of the banana crop. He says the deadly plant fungus also affects other musa species such as the plantain: ***“It causes premature ripening which is a serious defect in exported fruit. That concomitant reduction in yield translates to a reduction in export and export earnings, hence, a decrease in revenue and by extension a likely downturn in the economies of Member States dependent on bananas.”***

The OECS Secretariat officer says efforts to eradicate the plant disease can also create a further financial burden on farmers and the agriculture industry as a whole: ***“You would need to use a lot more fungicides at increased ratios and frequencies. This is costly. You also need to intensify your management practices including your cultural practices such as detrashing to prevent spores from germinating in the field, improve drainage and general management.”***

The black sigatoka fungus which destroys banana crops has been reported in at least three OECS Member States particularly those in the Windward Islands where already there is a fragile banana industry. Alcee says mechanisms can be applied to reduce the threat of the black sigatoka entering a country. He calls for stringent management and control practices: ***“What could be done is take a prophylactic approach to the management of the disease. Black sigatoka is spread by wind, water, insects mites, birds and other vectors and humans who could disseminate spores over short and long distances in a number of ways including field visits and successive handling of diseased and healthy plants or***

importation of plant material which may be an alternative host to the black sigatoka such as anthuriums and philodendrons. One of the ways of helping to curb the disease is for the quarantine experts to be more vigilant in preventing plant material of the aforementioned species from entering our ports.”

-Alcee

Commenting on the reported presence of the dreaded plant fungus in some OECS Member States the Agriculture Economist further responded that the parasite is not new to the Western Hemisphere. Alcee says the black sigatoka, first recognized in the Fiji Valley in 1963, was further discovered in 1972 in Honduras and gradually made its way to the Caribbean including Cuba, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and St. Lucia.