

9-2-2004

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Regional Agroexport." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9229>

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Regional Agroexport

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Central America

Published: 2004-09-02

In the interest of globalizing the war against the Mediterranean fruit fly, or *Ceratitis capitata*, or med fly (MF), Central American agriculture ministers met in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to discuss means to control the tiny bug. Small as it is, the MF blocks the road to worldwide export of the isthmus' agricultural products.

The ministers met with US undersecretary of agriculture Elsa Murano. The meeting, Consejo Agropecuario Centroamericano (CAC), was held in tandem with the XVIII Congreso Avícola Centroamericano y del Caribe. It took place under the aegis of Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). Named for the place where it was first discovered, the little MF is now resident on several continents, having reached Honduras sometime between 1995 and 1997, where it damages coffee, guayabas, pears, mangoes, tangerines, guanabanas, manzanas de montana, papayas, peaches, and other fruits.

Countries on the fly

At stake in the region is the expectation of significant increases in exports of fruits and vegetables to European, Asian, and US markets. Panama's president of the Grupo de Agroexportadores No Tradicionales (GANTRAP) Analeidys Chen said her group is in the process of seeking expanded exports to the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and other countries. The European market buys 62% of Panamanian exports, followed by the US at 36% and Costa Rica at 2%. During the 2003-2004 season, those exports translated to US\$31.9 million for 1,056 producers, US\$5.7 million more than the previous season. But expansion into the Japanese market is hampered by a Japanese ban because of the MF (see NotiCen, 1991-09-18).

Costa Rica is also seeking entry into Japan and is similarly locked out by the fly. The country sent a technical mission to Japan to try to come to an agreement that would allow the export of melons, mangoes, watermelons, pineapples, and papayas, as well as tubers, root crops, and herbs. The Japanese market has been closed to Costa Rican produce because of the MF.

"We have to assure the Japanese with procedures and critical points of control that the product will never arrive contaminated," said Magda Gonzalez, director of exports of the Ministry of Agriculture's Servicio Fitosanitario. She said some progress had been made in the case of melons and mangoes, because of a program with the US that allows for hydrothermal treatment of the fruits.

For other products, Gonzalez said the ministry plans research into MF-trapping programs, demonstrated fly-free packing facilities, demonstrated fly-free growing areas, and rigorous melon-by-melon inspection. But the MF casts a big shadow. Gonzalez would be satisfied with any concession the Japanese might make, even just a product or two. "If we succeed in opening this market, it is going to be very important for us. We have producers very energized to maintain the

quality of their products and that carries a lot of weight at a time when we attempt, with official authority, to open a market closed for phytosanitary reasons," she said.

Joining forces

Guatemala has teamed up with Mexico in an ambitious program to rid their territories of the MF. They signed a joint accord on March 9. The US, in the person of undersecretary of agriculture William Hawks, was a third party to a pact that seeks to see the end of the little bug sometime between 2006 and 2010. The US will contribute money for the effort. The project, called Programa Mosca del Mediterraneo (Moscamed), nevertheless faces difficulties owing to a lack of adequate funding, lack of legal structures in which the international organization can operate effectively, lack of taxation exemptions, and customs incompatibilities.

Mexico's undersecretary of agriculture Javier Trujillo said the plan is to extend a permanent "biological barrier" up to the Honduran border once MF ceases to cloud Guatemalan skies. Moscamed has been working in Mexico since 1978 and has eliminated the insect everywhere but in Chiapas, on the Guatemalan border (see SourceMex, 1997-02-05). Trujillo said aid to Guatemala's efforts has averaged US\$13 million a year and rose to US\$15 million in 2003. The US contributes about US\$30 million a year, and Guatemala makes in-kind contributions, bringing the annual expenditure to US\$60 million. By 2015, the goal is for Moscamed to have cleansed the entirety of the isthmus of any trace of MF, Guatemala's vice minister of agriculture Bernard Lopez said.

The work from now on is to proceed in stages, the first from 2004-2006, and the second, 2006-2010. The initial stage would complete the job in Chiapas, the second in Guatemala. The project relies on the introduction of sterile MFs to compete with fully functional flies and deal a slow but certain mortal blow to the species' reproductive capacity. A consultative committee of experts from Brazil, Mexico, and the US will oversee the strategy.

Nicaragua's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Jose Augusto Navarro went to Guatemala to visit a facility where the sterile flies are produced, with the idea of building a similar installation in his country and to seek funding for the project. The meeting in Honduras took up the question of uniformity of laws applicable to phytosanitary procedures, both at the CAC and at the XVIII Congreso, as well as those having to do with animals, agrochemicals, and genetically modified products to improve the acceptability of regional agricultural products on the international markets. The laws will concentrate on moving customs union plans forward also.

Other methods

An approach in El Salvador that doesn't require sterilizing flies has met with some limited success. The US has given its approval for the importation of a type of papaya, the Maradol, to the Asociacion de Productores de Papaya (Propapaya). The Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved the Maradol for entry after it was demonstrated in Brazil that this variety does not favor the propagation of the med fly. The USDA had previously approved another variety, the Hawaiana, but that variety is only grown in three departments of the

country and has serious drawbacks. Only 40% of the crop is fit for export, and it is disliked in the local market because it is smaller than what Salvadorans consider an attractive papaya.

Furthermore, this variety had to be subjected to thermal treatment, a process that requires special plants to be built at a cost of US\$80,000 to US\$100,000 each. Few Propapaya members are interested in growing Hawaiana. The result was that, until the approval of Maradol, El Salvador exported no fresh papayas to the US. Building these thermal plants is still a negotiable idea because Maradol must also be treated to enter the US, but Propapaya and the Agriculture and Cattle Ministry (MAG) are wrangling over who should pay for it. Propapaya has taken the position that the government should build the first one, and then, if it is profitable, private investors would invest in the technology.

Propapaya president Alfredo Cardoza said that is what was done in Guatemala, where several such plants now operate. Even with the thermal plants, the approval of Maradol is not the breakthrough Propapaya and El Salvador had hoped for, cautioned the Ministry of Agriculture's chief of plant sanitation Helmer Esquivel. "It's not that today they admit the papaya and tomorrow we're going to send everything we want," he said.

The USDA has other hoops to jump through. Maradol could be free of MF but still have other plagues or diseases. Also, he said, "the challenge to producers is to harvest quality fruit. That means a product acceptable to the eye and to taste." And then, he concluded, there is still the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to deal with. The FDA tests for levels of agrochemical residue. Esquivel enumerated the hurdles.

Other conditions are that only Maradol from certain departments, not from anywhere in the country, can enter the US. MF populations must be below a certain level in the growing area. Those levels must be demonstrated by collecting the flies in traps for at least a year before the first papaya heads north. Then and only then can the Ministry of Agriculture certify that thermal-treated papayas are fit for the trip.

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