

Media Advisory

21 January 2021

Pest Alert: Asian Citrus Greening '*Candidatus Liberibacter asiaticus*'

The Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) in the Republic of South Africa hereby alerts the agricultural community, importers, international travellers, academic institution and the entire citizenry about the potential risk faced by our country, Southern African Development Countries (SADC) region and the entire continent as it relates to the Asian citrus greening '*Candidatus Liberibacter asiaticus*'.

Asian citrus greening is the most devastating disease of citrus worldwide and, presently does not occur in sub-Saharan Africa. However, Asian Citrus Psyllid (ACP) was detected and is spreading in central-east Africa, and Huanglongbing (HLB) occurs in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritius and Reunion. Both HLB and ACP occurs in countries that are frequent trading partners with southern African countries, traders and travellers pose a threat of inadvertently spreading the disease or the vector.

Asian Citrus Greening is a bacterial disease caused by '*Candidatus Liberibacter asiaticus*' and is spread by the insect vector Asian Citrus Psyllid (ACP), *Diaphorina citri*. Symptoms on leaves and shoot include yellow shoots, asymmetric, mottled leaves, small upright chlorotic leaves, out of phase flushing and branch dieback. Flower and fruit symptoms include unseasonal and heavy flowering on diseased branches, small, lopsided, bitter-tasting fruit with small, brown, aborted seeds and uneven colouring at maturity and excessive fruit drop. The sooty mould growth resulting from excess honeydew production can also affect the plants' ability to photosynthesise, which can affect overall plant health. Production costs would increase because of the need to control this pest. Market access, the economy, the citrus and nursery industry and backyard citrus production would also be negatively affected.

Considering the socio-economic value and the impact that citrus production has in the country, this pest must be taken seriously because citrus contribute immensely to job creation and economic growth.

The citrus industry is the third largest horticultural industry after deciduous fruit and vegetables; and it is mainly aimed at export market. The industry contributed more than R20 billion to the total gross value of South African agricultural production during the 2016/17 production season. It is an important foreign exchange earner and it employs more than 120 000 people.

Any introduction, spread and establishment of this disease in the SADC region and/ or our country will result in immeasurable pressure to the citrus industry, given the other phytosanitary diseases and pests which the citrus industry is battling with, such as Citrus black spot, False codling moth and fruit flies.

The disease can be spread by the insect vector, as well as infected plant material. Prevention, early detection and rapid response will entail a coordinated approach between DALRRD, Provincial Departments of Agriculture (PDAs) and industry to ensure growers are protected as much as possible from this disease.

The National Plant Protection Organisation of South Africa (NPPOZA), within DALRRD, is already developing an early warnings system (EWS) for this pest in collaboration with the citrus industry and PDAs. This is in line with the South African Emergency Plant Pest Response Plan (SAEPPRP). More role players will be approached in the development of the EWS, to ensure all relevant organs of State, as well as research organisations, commercial, small scale and subsistence producers are included.

International travellers and the trading community are advised not to import host plant nursery material from any country into South Africa without following the necessary import procedures, as this may pose a threat of inadvertently spreading the disease or the vector.

Please contact DALRRD in case of any suspicious looking symptoms on citrus trees and fruit.

For further media enquiries, please contact:

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