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Taro Beetle Meeting and Taro Beetle Public Awareness

The taro beetle costs thousands of dollars in lost income to Fiji farmers. Taro is a multi-million dollar industry in Fiji and a lucrative income source for many rural farmers. Discussing strategies to manage the taro beetle was the main aim of the taro beetle meeting hosted by SPC Land Resources Division and Fiji Ministry of Agriculture, Sugar and Land Resources. The two-day gathering, held at Koronivia Research Station on Tuesday 23 and Wednesday 24 November, invited regional taro beetle experts to discuss current research in taro beetle management. So far, two control measures have shown potential: *Metarhizium* fungus and the pesticide Confidor. The next major step is to identify application rates for the two control measures. Countries with the taro beetle problem include Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, New Caledonia and PNG. The taro beetle management project is co-funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research.

To keep the public informed of the taro beetle problem a media awareness campaign was launched at the taro beetle meeting. The main message is to stop the beetle moving to new areas. Road-side billboards placed at main inter-island jetties, and radio and TV spots request the public not to move taro and other planting materials. A taro beetle 2005 calendar has also been released.

PPS Information and Communications put together the media campaign in collaboration with Fiji Ministry of Agriculture, Sugar and Land Resettlement.

International Kava Conference

The International Kava Conference (IKC) was organised by the International Kava Executive Council (IKEC) in Suva, Fiji on 30 November – 2 December 2004. The Conference was sponsored by Centre for the Development of Enterprise (CDE), ProInvest, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS), Fiji School of Medicine, University of the South Pacific, Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the Government of Fiji. The main objective of the Conference was to discuss new scientific data on safety and efficacy of kava in order to remove the current bans and restrictions on kava and its derivatives in key export markets. Participants included kava stakeholder representatives, scientists, health authorities and academics from 16 countries including the Pacific members of the African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) group of countries and European Union (EU) States.

The conference was officially opened by the Prime Minister of Fiji, Hon. Laisenia Qarase, with introductory remarks also delivered by the PIFS Secretary-General, Mr Greg Urwin. They both acknowledged the contributions of IKEC as well as all sponsoring institutions and sought the continued support of donors towards addressing the kava cause. The Prime Minister urged all concerned to strive towards the removal of the bans and restrictions as this would help restore much-needed income for rural households in particular. Amongst the measures he suggested to effect this were the harmonisation of kava legislation in the region to ensure that export market requirements are fulfilled by producers and exporters in the Pacific. The Secretary-General highlighted that the kava industry is an important element of regional economic development and will thus play a key role in supporting the goals of the Pacific Plan.

French Polynesia: Young Farmers Receive Training

An innovative scheme to train young farmers to be appropriately skilled in modern agricultural techniques was the aim of recently completed capacity building training. The training focused on plant protection practices and proper pesticide use in a collaborative effort between the Department of Rural Services (SDR) and SPC Plant Protection Service. Five farmers from Tahiti, seven from Moorea and one each from Anaa and Raiatea received training in pest and disease identification and practical application of pesticides and related health and environment issues. The training used lab and field exercises. Young farmers were awarded with certificates (*photo below*) at the completion of the training and also received safety equipment and hand-lenses for pest identification. PPS Extensionist Mr Steve Hazelman was on hand in French Polynesia to hand out the certificates.



Village Decree on Rhinoceros Beetle Control

Natuvu village in Savusavu, Fiji, depends mainly on coconut for the livelihood of the rural community. Making copra is a major activity to generate income. However, coconut logs left on the ground have created ideal breeding sites for the beetle to lay its eggs. And beetle damage has increased. To help the village remove beetle breeding sites PPS sent in a team of three staff from Koronivia Research Station to demonstrate proper method of disposing of coconut wood. They also put up pheromone traps around the village to kill the beetles. The village chief was shown the extensive damage caused by the beetle and the need to remove beetle breeding sites. After being shown beetle larvae found in decaying coconut wood and realising the seriousness of the situation, he decreed every Monday dedicated to removing decaying wood and cleaning around village plantations.

Nematode Disease Survey in Palau and Yap

PPS Nematode Technician Takaniko Ruabete carried out a first-ever plant parasitic nematode survey for Palau and Yap in October. Survey results will be the first nematode pest data for Palau and Yap. Disease surveys provide information to manage plant pests as well as to facilitate trade. The survey covered most of the cultivated crops with nematode sampling carried out where nematode symptoms were detected. Nematode specimens were extracted and fixed and sent to CABI Nematology laboratory in the UK for authenticated identifications.

Local growers have little knowledge on nematodes as plant diseases, and thus contribute to the spread of nematodes when they move planting material. Nematode problems increase in the soil through the use of infected planting material, monocropping of a single crop and associated host crop, lack of soil treatment for pot plants, and other practices. The limited land areas of these small Pacific states aggravate the nematode problem. Nematode problems decrease if these management practices are adopted.

Root-knot nematodes (*Meloidoyne* sp.) were found to be serious on several crops including papaya, noni, eggplant, tobacco, cucumber, bele and several other vegetables.

The burrowing nematode or banana nematode, *Radopholus similis*, a very destructive endoparasitic nematode of the tropics and subtropics, has been pointed out to cause a serious disease complex on giant swamp taro (*Cytosperma chamissonis*) in Yap State and most of FSM. Closer examination of diseased plants showed no real evidence that the nematode by itself is the main cause of the disease. Various damage symptoms on disease plants suggest a complex situation requiring closer research.

Nematode extractions were carried out on roots, soil and corms of infected taro plants, with the corms yielding extreme numbers of nematodes. Similar extractions were carried out for banana with similar results. Nematode samples have been sent to CABI in the UK for authenticated identification.

Giant swamp taro is an important food crop for Micronesian states and therefore research should be initiated to look at the pathogenicity of the nematode to see if it is the primary cause of the disease complex.

Nematode samples were also taken from betel nut to confirm if parasitic nematodes contribute in any way to the fungal disease now affecting betel nut trees in Palau and Yap State.

Coconut Wood Goes Flooring

Senile coconut trees have never looked attractive before, except to some tourists. But now they are, as they become a sustainable supply for a new project to commercially process coconut wood into high value timber applications. Rural villages with expansive swathes of coconut plantations can now look forward to making some money from their good old 'tree of life'. ACIAR, QDPI and SPC are collaborating on the project to turn coconut wood into fine up-market timber products with financial benefits going to the villages.

Delegates at a workshop on coconut wood utilisation held last month in Nadi, Fiji, organised by SPC Forestry Programme discussed the potential of coconut wood for the high-end flooring market. Coconut wood is placed competitively in the flooring industry given its hardwood qualities, unique appearance and the diminishing supplies of traditional hardwoods from the tropics. There is an enormous coconut wood resource from old coconut plantations littered throughout the Pacific islands, especially in the larger countries.

This project, in the pipeline for a 2006 implementation, will help develop international recognised standards for coconut wood in the flooring market as well as looking to establish small village-based primary processing units. These units can take up to 15,000 trees per year. The project will mercifully clear old coconut tree stands to make way for sustainable re-plantings.

HTFA Operational in Tonga

On 27 September 2004, Tonga successfully completed New Zealand MAF audit requirements for the re-accreditation of its HTFA Treatment Facility. Tonga can now export seven fruit fly host commodities, namely: breadfruit, chillies, eggplant, mango, pawpaw (papaya), tomato and avocado. These commodities can only be exported from Tonga into New Zealand through the High Temperature Forced Air treatment pathway.

Year 2004: It's a Wrap

The year is coming to a close as we recap developments at SPC Plant Protection Service. In the beginning of the year a re-alignment of technical services focused on five areas of technical expertise: entomology (absorbing fruit fly activities), plant pathology (inclusive of virology), weed management, biosecurity and trade facilitation and information and extension. This streamlining of technical services was deemed necessary to better use available resources in staffing and funding and to maximise impact on PICTs. Four staff left PPS during the year: Nilesh Prasad (Graphic Artist) Ema T Vueti (Fruit Fly Management), Richard Vernon (Coordinator, Information and Extension) and Dr Mick Lloyd as Plant Protection Adviser.

Mick's tenure saw PPS enjoying its highest ever staffing and funding levels for plant protection in all the 50-plus years it has been serving the PICTs. Mick has been instrumental in overseeing the implementation of the two major plant protection projects: the AusAID and

NZAid Pest Management in the Pacific (PMP) and the EU/Plant Protection in the Pacific (PPP), both of which will terminate at the end of next year. We wish Mick all the best for the future.

New staff joined PPS this year: Sarah Pene (Information Assistant for PLD) and Simone Tukidia (Graphic Artist).

In March PPS hosted the regional consultation on Biosecurity, Plant Protection and Animal Health in an effort to consolidate these three technical areas and to bring them to working closely to address the challenges of the new World Trade Organization. Delegates discussed how PICTs can participate in world trade without adversely affecting the socio-economic status of Pacific Islanders.

Perhaps the biggest development at PPS this year was the implementation of the review recommendations for an integrated SPC agriculture programme. The subsequent formation of the integrated Land Resources Division (LRD) headed by Mr Aleki Sisifa as Division Head, followed by the hosting of the first combined conference of Heads of Agriculture and Forestry in September, heralds a new era for SPC. This integration of SPC programmes brings together forestry and agro-forestry programmes and the various agricultural services including PPS, Animal Health and Production, Regional Germplasm Centre and the DSAP Project.

The integrated LRD provides services to PICTs under two major activities: Biosecurity and Trade Facilitation and Sustainable Management of Forestry and Agriculture. The five core activities of PPS complement the new look LRD and no doubt will contribute tremendously to achieving the goals of the Division.

LRD is hoping to start producing an integrated newsletter focusing on major developments occurring across the region.

And on that note PPS would like to wish all readers of Pest Info a very Merry Christmas. See you all in good health in 2005!

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