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Ivory Coast Cocoa Crop Is Threatened by Swollen-Shoot Disease  
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By Monica Mark

Jan. 28 (Bloomberg) -- Swollen-shoot disease may infect the main cocoa-growing region of Ivory Coast, the world's largest producer of the beans, after spreading in two parts of the country, agriculture industry officials and farmers said.

The contagious virus has spread in orchards in the central towns of Sinfra and Bouafle, Adou Ebrotie, who heads the Sinfra branch of the National Rural Development Agency, known as Anader, said in an interview on Jan. 22. Bouafle and Sinfra are 50 kilometers (31 miles) east of Daloa and Gagnoa, which each account for about 300,000 metric tons of annual production.

"Forty percent of orchards in Sinfra and Bouafle have been touched, according to the surveys we've carried out" since the disease was detected two years ago, said Ebrotie. "We're worried because once it's installed, three years later that area is devastated."

Ivory Coast is expected to produce 1.42 million kilograms of cocoa beans this season, up 3.7 percent from a year earlier, according to the International Cocoa Organization's Web site.

The West African nation accounts for about 36 percent of global output, the ICCO said.

Output in Bouafle and Sinfra has dropped from as much as 80,000 tons a year to as low as 30,000 tons in recent years, according to the state-run Bourse du Café et du Cacao.

The swollen-shoot virus is spread by insects and attacks the leaves and shoots of cocoa trees. The plants usually die within two years. Farmers' only means of stopping the disease spreading is to uproot and burn affected orchards.

#### Research Funds

State-run cocoa agencies in February 2008 set aside 778 million CFA Francs (\$1.67 million) to research the disease.

"This is a new disease in Ivorian cocoa culture," Amoncho Adiko director of the National Center for Agricultural Research, said in a phone interview from Abidjan. "For us to investigate the two million plus hectares and find out where the disease is, how it develops and what's the affected-area, we will need about two years."

The center has recommended farmers plant hybrid seeds that are more resistant to swollen shoot, he said.

Michael Yameogo, a farmer in the western region of Soubre, said the disease had also been detected in the area. Soubre, which hasn't previously been affected by the disease, produces about 150,000 tons of cocoa a year.

"When we plant the cocoa trees in contaminated soil, the leaves wither and die after a few weeks," Yameogo said. "We've been told this is swollen-shoot. Luckily not so many farmers seem to have this problem, but the ones that have it are badly affected. If the new disease spreads, it will make many farmers miserable."

## Disease Spreading

Farmers in Daloa said they had been told by the Rural Development Agency that swollen shoot was already in the area.

"We're just farmers, so we don't know the names of these diseases," Michel Gueya, a grower in Daloa, said in an interview on Jan. 22 "The officials told us the symptoms of swollen shoot and told us to destroy any trees with those symptoms because the disease is now entering this region."

The new hybrid varieties of seeds distributed by the cocoa agencies were either insufficient or producing mixed results, farmers and officials said.

The state-run Coffee-Cocoa Management Committee said in September it would distribute enough hybrid seeds to replant 15,000 hectares (37,066 acres) of cocoa trees. The seeds would be given to farmers in areas affected by swollen-shoot disease, Bonu Manjuele, an adviser to the Farmers' Development Fund, which works with the committee, said in September.

Farmer Alain Niangoran said in an interview in Konofla that the hybrids were difficult to cultivate.

"It's worse with the new variety, they're even more fragile," he said. "They become yellow very soon after we plant them, and the lack of rainfall isn't helping either."

"At the moment, the new seeds are resisting well," the Anader's Ebrotie said of the worse-hit Sinfra region. "Unfortunately we haven't been able to give it to many farmers."

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