

PEST ALERT



Red Palm Mite (*Raoiella indica*): A Threat to Bahamian Palm Handicraft

Handicrafts are unique expressions of a particular culture or community through local craftsmanship and materials; one such expression is straw handicraft. Bahamians have been engaged in the straw industry since the 18th century. Handicraft was traditionally woven from Sisal, and the fronds of a variety of palms grown wild throughout the Bahamas including coconut and thatch palms.

There are many pests and diseases that affect palms and that have rapidly spread through the Western hemisphere; one of particular interest is the Red Palm Mite (RPM). This mite is easily distributed by wind currents and movement of infested plants through nursery stock and cut branches of plants. Seed coconuts and palm handicrafts have been found to harbor live mites and viable eggs and are viewed as likely pathways for the transport of these pests from country to country.

The RPM is an invasive pest of palms (coconut, Areca, Date palms) and banana plants. The pest arrived in the Caribbean in 2004, spreading to many islands to date, and posing a significant threat to the ornamental palm, coconut and banana industries. Its presence has not yet been confirmed in the Bahamas.

The RPM is flat, about 1/100th of an inch in length, bright red, with long body hairs, usually with a drop of liquid at the tip of the hair visible with the naked eye. It does not spin webs like most mites do. RPM occurs on the underside of leaves in groups of a few individuals to hundreds, usually along the midrib, where they feed, lay eggs, and breed. It feeds on leaves of 32 species of palms, bananas, ginger, etc. and causes localized yellowing of leaves followed by tissue death.

To inspect for RPM, look on the underside of the leaves of the host plants listed above. Damage symptoms alone are not sufficient to determine if the pest is present. Instead the mites must be found on leaves. If available, use a hand lens to compare the mite specimens with the red palm mite pictures. If the specimens look similar to the red palm mite, please call BAHFSA or the Department of Agriculture. This mite can potentially cause significant losses to palms and other host plants grown in The Bahamas.

In The Bahamas, there have been several instances of illegal imports of foreign straw that may have on occasion been infested with RPM. Unfortunately, this has led to instances when those straw products have been banned from entry into the United States. (should this be stated as we have received non-compliance reports from the USDA of straw products from the Bahamas intercepted at US borders with RPM? Artisans suggest the RPM was detected in foreign straw products and not authentic Bahamian palm handicraft).

If you are planning to export palm handicrafts to the United States, please be advised of the following requirements:

- Palm fronds and craft items woven into handicrafts are allowed (subject to inspection). Such items include baskets, bracelets, fans, hats, headbands, napkin rings and placements. **Entry is prohibited unless the item was processed (bleached, dyed, painted, or shellacked) beyond just crafting/weaving.**
- Green date palm (*Phoenix* spp.) fronds are only allowed if they are accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate attesting to the origin of the commodity.
- Fresh, green, and/or pliable palm fronds are prohibited entry.
- Commercial shipments of items made from palm fronds (processed or unprocessed) would be inspected upon arrival at a U.S. port of entry.
- A phytosanitary certificate is also required.

Following an application by an exporter for a phytosanitary certificate and the visual inspection of the commodity by an Agricultural Officer, a phytosanitary certificate is issued attesting to the origin of the commodity and its freedom from quarantine pests and that it meets the importing country's phytosanitary requirements. This certificate does not however automatically guarantee acceptance and entry of a consignment into an importing country.

BAHFSA in conjunction with CABI (Center for Agriculture and Biological Sciences International) is preparing to train technical staff to conduct surveillance in key palm handicraft productive areas of the country for RPM and for the introduction to biological control if present.

What can you do?

- Do not bring any palms, seedlings or vegetative material of palms without the required Plant Import Permit.
- When you travel, declare all agricultural items.
- If you suspect that a particular palm has red palm mite or any pest/disease, please report it immediately to BAHFSA and the Department of Agriculture.

Help us to protect our Bahamian Palm handicraft!

Additional Information

For more information on giant African snails, contact the Plant Protection Division of BAHFSA at (242)604-7004; email:bahfsa@bahamas.gov.bs; yasminjohnson@bahamas.gov.bs