Disease-free cooking bananas developed

By Abdulkarim Ssempango

Scientists have announced a breakthrough in the search for banana varieties that will be resistant to pests and diseases.

The announcement was made during the fifth annual improvement of banana for smallholder farmers project planning workshop held at Lake View Hotel in Mbarara.

The three-day workshop organised by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) was attended by an international team of researchers from the Great Lakes region of Africa and beyond.

Prof. Rony Swennen, a senior banana breeder at IITA, announced that in collaboration with NARO, they have developed a range of new banana hybrids adding that five hybrids of the local banana project is enabling us to link other breeding programmes across the world, to exchange banana varieties and use the best material in our breeding programme.

"This is the first time this has happened on such a scale," said Jerome Kubiriza, the head of the banana programme at NARO and head of breeding activities in Uganda for the project.

He added that the project has seen over 200 Matoke hybrids further selected for yield evaluation in the field, with over 10,000 in the nursery.
**Disease-free cooking bananas developed**

**MBARARA**

By Abdulkarim Seengendo

Scientists have announced a breakthrough in the search for banana varieties that will be resistant to pests and diseases.

The announcement was made during the fifth annual improvement of banana for smallholder farmers project planning workshop held at Lake View Hotel in Mbarara.

The three-day workshop organized by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) was attended by an international team of researchers from the Great Lakes region of Africa and beyond.

Prof. Rony Swennen, a senior banana breeder at IITA, announced that in collaboration with NARO, they have developed a range of new banana hybrids adding that five hybrids of the local banana are already being tested in Mbarara, Hoima, Fort Portal and Kampala.

Swennen noted that the new breeds grow much faster and have more than double the harvest on plantations whose life can be much longer than the normal bananas.

He said the project has been implemented in Uganda and Tanzania, adding that they have sent materials to DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.

He said the project is focused on the two popular cooking bananas in the region — East Africa highland banana also known as Matooke and Mchare, which is mostly grown in Uganda and Tanzania.

"Bananas are immensely important in the eastern region but are being heavily attacked by pests and diseases. This project is enabling us to link our breeding programmes across the world, to exchange banana varieties and use the best material in our breeding programme."

"This is the first time this has happened on such a scale," said Jerome Kubiraba, the head of the banana programme at NARO and head of breeding activities in Uganda for the project.

He added that the project has seen over 200 Matooke hybrids further selected for yield evaluation in the field, with over 10,000 in the pipeline, while over 500 hybrid Mchare are currently under early evaluation in the field. In Tanzania, he said they have seen the creation of the first ever Mchare hybrid.

Dr Ambrose Agona, the director general of NARO, said the project will increase productivity levels of bananas from 10 to 15 hectares per year to 60-70 hectares.

"Farmers have low yields because of pests and diseases. As a result, we have to plan more to double harvest. We can use research and come up with varieties that are resistant to pests and diseases," Agona said.

He challenged experts to look at unexploited kind of potential in bananas and that they should help link farmers to agro-industrialisation.