

# Farmers squeezed by olive tree disease sell presses

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Farmers in Puglia are selling their olive oil presses after a deadly bacterial disease infected 20 million olive trees, devastating a vital sector of Italian agriculture and causing more than £1 billion of damage.

Presses in Salento, a region in Italy's southeastern heel, have been dismantled and shipped to Morocco and Tunisia in a battle against "olive tree leprosy" that has infected 40 per cent of Puglia's groves.

"It's a dog that bites its own tail," Savino Muraglia, president of the Puglia Coldiretti, the farmers' association, said. "If the farmers don't plant new trees, they don't produce olives and the presses die. If the presses die, when and if there are new olives there will be no facilities with which to process them."

*Xylella fastidiosa* is carried by sap-sucking insects such as the meadow

spittlebug. It was first detected in Puglia in 2013 and is believed to have been introduced by ornamental plants imported from Costa Rica.

Officials say that it has infected at least 21 million trees, is moving north at 2km a month and has no known cure. Outbreaks have also been reported in Spain, France, Portugal and Israel.

Sixty per cent of the extra virgin olive oil sold in Italian supermarkets is now imported from abroad, Coldiretti said.

Pierfederico la Notte, an agronomist seeking a cure with Italy's National Research Council, is cautiously optimistic. He is investigating resistance in two types of olive tree: the leccino and favolosa. "The disease has been present in the United States for 120 years and they still haven't found a solution," he said. "It will be a long and difficult battle. There is no magic bullet." A researcher in Tuscany is exploring use of a fungus to kill disease-carrying insects.



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