

SPECIAL REPORT
FAO/WFP CROP AND FOOD SUPPLY ASSESSMENT
MISSION TO MAURITANIA WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON
LOSSES DUE TO THE DESERT LOCUST

21 December 2004

Highlights

- Devastating infestations of desert locusts in the main agricultural areas of Mauritania were noted since the start of the rains in June and July, and continued throughout the growing season.
- Millet and legumes (cowpeas and groundnut) suffered serious damage. Sorghum and rice were less severely affected.
- There was insufficient rainfall for good crop and pasture development in many areas which, combined with the damage caused by the desert locusts, aggravated crop losses. Since the level of water in the reservoirs and the River Senegal valley is well below normal, negative effects can be expected for irrigated production which is also at risk from the borer.
- Cereal production this year has been estimated at 101 200 tonnes, a fall of about 44 percent on last year's figures and 36 percent less than the average for the last five years.
- Domestic supplies will only cover 21 percent of the country's cereal requirements, estimated at 478 000 tonnes for the 2004/05 season. Total imports (commercial plus food aid pledges) have been estimated at about 312 700 tonnes and so the remaining cereal deficit is in the order of 64 300 tonnes.
- Markets are characterized by a shortage of dry cereals as last season's stocks run out and due to the sharp fall in supplies from Mali. Food prices are rising on all markets and it is very likely that they will continue to rise in the months to come.
- Access to food is already posing problems for many households, both rural and urban, who are directly or indirectly affected by the crisis. This situation could worsen at the start of 2005 if appropriate measures are not taken quickly to help the populations most affected. The country is, in fact, moving towards a food crisis that will probably be worse than the one experienced in 2002/03.
- The socio-economic groups in extreme food difficulties are to be found, above all, in the North, Aftout, Affolé, south Assaba and south of the two Hodhs. These groups are mainly settled farmers who depend on rainfed agriculture, small livestock farmers and households who make a living from market gardening and date growing.
- The urgent supply of agricultural inputs is recommended to allow the affected farmers to start the new agricultural season in April 2005 in good conditions. In the short-term, the distribution of seeds (especially vegetable seeds) could help to improve the food security of the households concerned.
- The availability of pasture is also very limited due to drought and desert locust damage. There are only three or four months' worth of grazing left for the livestock population which has already begun to move on. The rapid organization of adapted transhumance corridors, the production of fodder crops in the irrigated areas as well as the supply of animal feed are necessary.

1. OVERVIEW

Mauritania is one of the main Sahel countries known, as early as the start of 2004, to be at risk of agricultural production losses as a result of a potentially very large growth of the desert locust population. In August it was noted that a large number of swarms and hopper bands were devouring the vegetation in most of the crop-growing and pasture zones of the country. Therefore FAO, WFP and CILSS joined forces to help estimate pre-harvest agricultural production for the year and to assess the impact of locust infestation on crops, livestock, and household vulnerability. A FEWS-NET representative joined the team and actively participated in the field visit and then in the data analysis process.



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The mission, accompanied by two observers (one from the EU, the other from USAID), enjoyed the cooperation and participation of the Food Security Commission and the Ministry for Rural Development and the Environment (MDRE) who supplied all the available data and organized the field trips. Nevertheless, the results of the agricultural survey used each year to determine the planted area and the type of crops, in addition to estimating agricultural production, were not yet available because the survey was just about to start. The team therefore worked with MDRE statisticians and used the observations made in the field and historical data to estimate the planted area in 2004/05 and to forecast agricultural production and losses due to the desert locust. Four teams went into the field and spoke to rural households, local-level officials, technicians working in the field of agriculture and food security, and the NGOs. These four teams covered the north, south-west, south-east and centre-south of the country.

The main conclusions of the mission are as follows:

Devastating infestations of desert locusts in the main agricultural zones of Mauritania were noted from the start of the rains for the seedlings in June and July. The nature and extent of the damage varied according to the type of crops, the density and duration of the locust infestation in the fields, and the stage of crop development at the time of the invasion. Millet and legumes (cowpeas and groundnut) were almost entirely destroyed. Sorghum and rice were less severely affected.

There was insufficient rainfall for good crop and pasture development in many areas which, combined with the damage caused by the desert locusts, caused further crop losses. The level of water in the reservoirs and the River Senegal valley was well below normal which will probably harm production.

Cereal production this year has been estimated at 101 200 tonnes, a loss of about 44 percent in relation to last year's results and 36 percent less than the average for the last five years.

For the 2004/05 season, domestic supplies of cereals have been estimated at 101 200 tonnes against expected consumption of 478 200 tonnes and so total import requirements are 377 000 tonnes. Commercial imports have been forecast at 281 600 tonnes and announced food aid will bring in 31 100 tonnes. The uncovered cereal deficit is 64 300 tonnes.

At the moment, the markets are well stocked with imported food (rice and wheat) but the supply of dry cereals and cowpeas is very low because national production stocks have run out and supplies from Mali have fallen sharply as a result of the combination of drought and the locust invasion which has also affected that country's border zone.

The price of food is rising throughout the country and it is very likely that it will continue to rise in the months to come. For many rural households, access to food is already problematic. The risk of the country suffering a food crisis as in 2002/03 is currently very high.

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