Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FAO Regional Office for Africa

Fall army worm outbreak, a blow to prospects of recovery for southern Africa

New pest poses novel threat to region reeling from effects of consecutive droughts

The new pest - fall army worm. Photo © Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanisation and Irrigation Development, Zimbabwe.

February 2017, Harare – A fall armyworm outbreak, the first emergence of the pest in southern Africa, is causing considerable crop damage in some countries. If the pest damage aggravates, it could dampen prospects for good crop harvests that is anticipated in the current farming season. Maize, a staple food in the region has been the most affected, as well as other cereals including sorghum, millet and wheat.

Southern Africa is reeling from the effects of two consecutive years of El Nino-induced drought that affected over 40 million people, reduced food availability by 15 percent and caused a cereal deficit of 9 million tonnes.

The FAO Subregional Coordinator for southern Africa, David Phiri, said that the situation was constantly evolving. “The situation remains fluid. Preliminary reports indicate possible presence (of the pest) in Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has positively identified the presence of the pest while the rest are expected to release test results soon," he said.

In Zambia, the Government has already spent US$ 3 million in an attempt to control the pest that has affected approximately 130 000 hectares of crops. However, the full extent of the damage in the country and other affected countries, is yet to be established. The pest which primarily spreads through wind dispersal and host plant products, is reported to be still active. The affected countries are also in different stages of assessing the damage to the crops because the outbreaks did not occur simultaneously.

Fall armyworm is a relatively new pest from the Americas, whose presence on the African continent was first reported in Sao Tome and Principe around January 2016. The pest is known to cause extensive crop losses of up to 73 percent depending on existing conditions and is difficult to control with a single type of pesticide, especially when it has reached an advanced larval development stage.

Emergency Regional Meeting to shape coordinated action

FAO, in partnership with the Southern African Development Committee (SADC) and the International Red Locust Control Organization for Central and Southern Africa (IRLCO-CSA), is organizing an Emergency Regional Meeting of key stakeholders from 14 to 16 February 2017 in Harare, Zimbabwe.

“Southern Africa is currently facing serious threats posed by diverse transboundary pests and diseases, including the varied armyworms, locusts, the tomato leaf minor and maize lethal necrosis disease. The Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, H5N8 strain, that has been confirmed to be in Uganda and possibly Rwanda too, is likely to spread southwards, along the wild bird migration routes”, said David Phiri.

The Harare meeting will discuss the strengthening of surveillance, preparedness and coordinated emergency responses to transboundary crop pests and livestock diseases, including the fall armyworm infestation. It will also discuss control strategies and measures and provide a platform for sharing experiences and valuable lessons.

The meeting is being organized with funding availed to FAO by the Africa Solidarity Trust Fund, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFiD).

Developing capacities for rapid response

As the region faces up to these new and emerging challenges, that are threatening the livelihoods of over 70 percent of the population that depend on agriculture, there is a crucial need to enhance capacity at country and regional levels, to prevent, detect and respond rapidly to any new pests and diseases threat.

“The countries need to maintain and, where needed, expand diagnostic laboratory, surveillance and response capacity as well as conduct assessments and research to enable rapid responses to recurrent and new threats”, said David Phiri.

FAO is working with governments, the SADC and other stakeholders to develop and roll out an appropriate strategy to determine the level of fall armyworm infestation and its impact on crop production. The organization will continue supporting response efforts as well as contribute to enhancing the resilience capacity of the countries and stakeholders in the region.