



THREAT TO DROUGHT RECOVERY

Armyworm outbreak in SA

Kamcilla Pillay

KWAZULU-Natal farmers are closely monitoring their crops for signs of fall armyworm following yesterday's confirmation by authorities that the destructive pest had infested farms in South Africa for the first time.

The outbreak, say experts, could hamper drought recovery efforts and affect farming productivity.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the UN said aggregate maize production last year was estimated at about 7.7 million tons, down 27% from the previous year's already reduced output.

The steep decline, they said, was mainly attributed to the El Niño-related drought conditions that curbed white maize yields by 25% compared to the five-year average, while an overall reduction in the area planted also contributed to the smaller harvest.

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries had been conducting tests since last month, when several farmers began noticing an unidentified pest destroying maize plants in districts of Limpopo, and in the North West Province.

They suspected that the insect could be *Spodoptera frugiperda*, which is native to South and Central America and also occurs in the southern states of the US.

"The worm was first detected on the African continent in 2016, approximately a year ago, when it was reported

from Nigeria, and it spread to several other West African countries and to Central Africa by April. The moths are good flyers and wind currents may disperse them over large distances."

They said that since the pest was very new in Africa, very little was known about its long-term effects.

At the briefing yesterday, the department said it had implemented the South African Emergency Plant Pest Response Plan which dealt with new pest detections in the country.

Harvest

"Now that there is a positive identification, we will continue assessment of spread and damage, and awareness actions to provide farmers with accurate technical information and control options."

Pheromone traps would be imported into South Africa to determine the exact extent of the spread and the specific strain of worm present.

"A process of emergency registration of agricultural chemicals is ongoing, with two active ingredients already registered to be applied against this pest. As with all agricultural remedy applications, the label instructions must be followed in accordance to the supplier's recommendations."

An awareness campaign had been rolled out to all provinces. Chief executive of the KZN Agricultural Union, Sandy La Marque, told The Mercury yesterday that the organisation had already

issued directives to members.

"We've issued the message in both isiZulu and English so that all our farmers can alert us of any potential problems."

She said there was still much work to do to find out how to respond to the pest locally. The aim now was to prevent it from spreading.

She said that while the province did not produce the most maize in the country, many farmed it for their own use and it was part of their staple diet.

"It is also grown for animal feed."

La Marque said that the pest infestation was a knock to recovery efforts, especially after the recent drought.

"I don't want to create panic about the situation. At the moment, we are focusing on prevention."

The FAO said in a statement yesterday that the outbreak had been causing considerable crop damage in some countries.

"It could dampen prospects for good crop harvests that is anticipated in the current farming season. Maize has been the most affected, as well as other cereals including sorghum, millet and wheat," they said.

The pest, it said, was known to cause extensive crop losses of up to 73% depending on existing conditions and is difficult to control with a single type of pesticide. The FAO said there was an urgent need to enhance capacity at country and regional levels, to prevent, detect and respond rapidly to any new pests and disease threat.