



Farmers in Cameroon's Northern region are struggling with the effects of the fall armyworm invasion on their farms. Photo Credit: Elias Ngalame

Fall armyworm invasion hits Cameroon maize value chain

By Elias Ngalame

MAIZE farmers in Cameroon's Northern region are struggling to come to terms with the effects of the fall armyworm invasion of their farms in recent years.

The insect pest has damaged about 80,000 hectares of farmland in Cameroon, slashing harvests of the country's staple cereal crops by as much as three-quarters in some regions, the government said.

That means hunger and economic hardship for the 12 million people that rely on the harvests - not just farmers, but businesses, from poultry to pig farmers to local brewers.

Most of those affected are small-scale farmers.

"We are very unlucky with this pest invasion. Why all this ill luck, for heaven's sake? This means little or no income, and poverty for me and my family," Makia Jean, a maize farmer, said.

The Ministry of Agriculture said the pest had proved hard to eradicate, and that the impact had been felt across the region.

"The damage has been rapid, affecting both farmers

and business operators," Louissette Clemence Bamzok, head of agriculture development, said.

Leon Tapngou, 55, who keeps poultry in the capital Yaounde, described the pest's spread as abnormal.

"I have never seen this in my 35 farming years. I hope our gods are not angry," he said.

Experts warn weather conditions, including strong winds that help the fall armyworm moth travel greater distances, could cause further problems.

"With climate threats, the spread of the pest could intensify," said Ntonifor Charlie, head of programmes at the Centre for Environment and Rural Transformation (CERUT).

In recent years, Cameroon enjoyed a steady rise in maize production, from 1.9 million tons in 2019 to around 2.16 million tons in 2022.

That brought hope of a better future for farmers and businesses reliant on cereals.

But the country's production of cereals such as maize, sorghum and millet likely dropped to below average last year, a FAO 2023 report showed, in part due to climate and security issues.

At the same time, the price of maize has climbed 38 percent since last year, state media quoted the Agriculture minister as saying in May.

That means lower profits for farmers like Tapngou, even though the price he can get for a chicken has risen by a quarter to 1,500 CFA francs (\$2.56) per kilo.

That is because, when poultry and other livestock prices increase, consumers typically switch to other meat options such as fish, said Francois Djonou, who heads the Cameroon Association of Poultry Farmers.

Maize supplies about 45 percent of the feed for poultry, pigs and other farm livestock, said Cletus Doum, who heads a farming-focused non-profit called the Association of Citizens

for the Defence of Collective Interests, known by its French acronym ACDIC.

Higher feed prices mean the poultry industry will likely struggle in coming months, said Doum, an agronomist.

Edward Kum, who rears pigs in Yaounde, is spending 50,000 CFA francs monthly on feed, up about 50 percent from 2022.

"This means a higher production cost and lower profit margin by the time the pigs are mature for sale," he said.

The government said a shortage of feed could see pig production drop by a fifth by the peak year-end festive period.

"We are advising livestock farmers to diversify income sources so another maize destruction crisis or extreme weather event doesn't put them out of business," Bamzok said.

Local brewers for whom maize is a key ingredient in the production of beer known as 'billy-billy' in the north and 'kwacha' in the south have also been hit with price hikes.

Vendors in local markets in Yaounde said kwacha now sells for 150 CFA francs (\$0.26) per litre, a 50 percent rise from before the fall armyworm crisis.

"We have to increase the price, because that of maize has also increased," said Adeline Ngum, a kwacha brewer and vendor in Yaounde's Mokolo market.

Price rises have not affected the country's main brewer, France's Les Brasseries du Cameroun, a company official said, as it sources most of its maize from abroad.

With market prices for maize rising steeply - from about 1,100 CFA francs in 2021 for a five-litre bucket, to nearly 2,000 CFA francs today - some fear unrest.

"The situation is serious, and we fear a repeat of another hunger riot should government not act fast," said Doum, of citizen's group ACDIC.

Meanwhile, efforts to combat fall armyworm using pesticides have been unsuccessful.

"We are working with the (state's) Institute of Agricultural Research for Development to find a lasting solution," Bamzok said.

In March, Agriculture Minister announced a new approach using different pesticides, and appealed for private and international partners to provide money and help.



Efforts to combat fall armyworm using pesticides have been unsuccessful. Photo Credit: Elias Ngalame