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“If they are not controlled nothing will be left for our livestock” – farmers worry as Namibia battles its worst Brown Locust outbreak

FAO is boosting Namibia’s locust surveillance and monitoring to avert a possible disaster

21 April 2022, Namibia – The Brown Locust outbreaks in Southern Africa have not captured headlines in the same way as the desert locust in the Horn of Africa, and the Arabian peninsula has done. However, the pest remains a daunting challenge in regions in southern Namibia. The country is battling the fourth and worst wave of Brown Locusts outbreak.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform (MAWLR) in Namibia estimates that around 1.2 million hectares of cultivated fields have been infested by Brown Locusts in //Karas region alone, which has already spilled over into the neighbouring Hardap region to the north of //Karas. Both regions are just emerging from a six-year harsh drought period that ended recently in 2019, and the outbreak of the locust is heavily affecting livelihoods and agricultural production.

Worrying impact on the ground

//Karas and Hardap regions’ main source of livelihoods is livestock farming, with about 70-80 percent of inhabitants raising small stock such as goats and sheep for own consumption and income.

Johannes Muhenje – a farmer from Aus – says he has never witnessed such large swarms of locusts in the 30 years that he has lived and reared animals in the //Karas region.

“The locusts have started feasting on the grass and trees near our cattle outposts and very soon if they are not brought under control nothing will be left for our livestock,” Johannes said expressing uncertainty about the future.

Eddy Kooper, a small-scale farmer in Constansia 2, a livestock outpost, expressed fear of what lies ahead if the locusts are not controlled.

“It’s a dire situation, we hope that the government can bring it under control and salvage the remaining grass so that our livestock do not starve during the winter period,” he said.

Brown Locust masses on roads have also made roads in the region very slippery and dangerous. Locust related accidents have become frequent and several people have lost their lives in these accidents.

Scaling up monitoring and surveillance

To avert a crisis, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been at the forefront of supporting the Namibian Government through MAWLR in its monitoring and surveillance activities to boost the Ministry’s locust control efforts on the ground. This current support builds on prior support targeting similar outbreaks of African Migratory Locust and Red Locust in the northern part of the country.

With funding from the USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), FAO through the project “African Migratory Locust Response to Mitigate Impacts on Food Security and Livelihoods” is servicing 22 vehicles carrying out monitoring and control efforts. This support enables personnel on the ground to survey large tracts of land infested by locusts and to carry out locust control interventions.

Recently, FAO through partial funding from USAID-BHA donated 56 smartphones and 40 tablets to MAWLR to enable the Ministry to intensify surveillance, monitoring and the timely reporting and sharing of information on the locust outbreak.

So far, the Ministry has managed to survey 2.119 million hectares across the country.

Despite the challenges encountered in the field by monitoring and control personnel, including the rocky and sometimes inaccessible terrain in certain areas, the monitoring and control teams remain resolute in their mission to safeguard livelihoods.

“Surveillance and control can be a challenge in such a large region such as //Karas but we are trying our very best each day,” said Llewellyn Muenjo, MAWLR’s Chief Agricultural Technician in //Karas, who is leading a surveillance and control team on the ground. “We are hopeful that with strong stakeholder collaboration, such as that with FAO, we can overcome this threat and be able to avert a full-blown disaster,” he added.

Additionally, FAO has facilitated training of 348 farmers and 158 technical staff on the eLocust3m mobile phone application for surveillance, monitoring and mapping across all 14 regions in Namibia.

“FAO remains committed to support Namibia’s efforts to bring these menacing pests under control and encourages all stakeholders to join hands in combatting the outbreak,” said Gift Kamupingene, FAO National Project Coordinator.

Locust outbreaks in Namibia

During February 2020 the first wave of the African Migratory Locust (AML) was reported in north-eastern in the Zambezi and Kavango East and West regions.

This was followed by a second wave which was reported in August 2020, and covering the north-eastern as well as north-central regions of Kunene, Ohangwena, Oshana, Omusati and Oshikoto.

In March 2021, a third wave was reported and this comprised of AML and Red Locust – to a lesser extent – in the aforementioned areas, and Brown Locust in the southern parts.

During that period, it was reported that over 2 000 hectares of cropland and more than 700 000 hectares of grazing fields were negatively impacted by the locusts.

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