

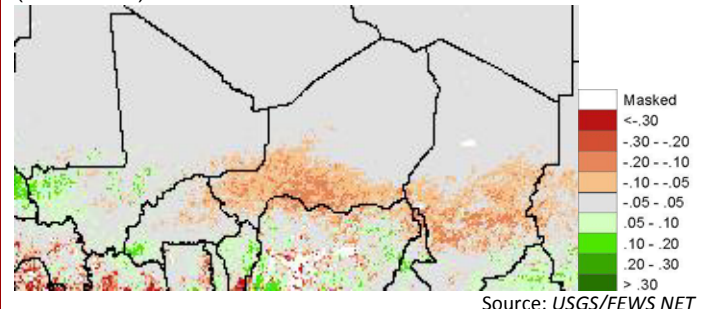
WEST AFRICA Food Security Alert

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Poor 2009/10 millet harvest in West Africa's eastern Sahel region

The poor distribution of rains during the 2009 rainy season in the Sahelian zone of West Africa's eastern market basin resulted in poor production, in Niger, northeastern Mali and Burkina Faso, far northern Nigeria, and central Chad particularly for millet, the staple food of the poor (Figure 1). Production of millet is likely to be 30 percent below average, and total cereal production for 2009/10 in West Africa is below last year's record harvests. Total regional production, however, is expected to be near average thanks to surpluses in the region's west basin and Sudanian and Guinean zones. If food flows relatively freely from surplus to deficit areas, availability in affected areas will be sufficient to meet needs. Access to food via markets, however, will be constrained by high prices and reduced incomes. Needs for assistance will be higher than normal for pastoralists and agro-pastoralist between January and at least June when migrant laborers return home to plant. Poor agriculturalists in Niger, Chad, and northeastern Mali will need assistance until the early harvests in August. If government policies restrict cereal flows, these people could face reduced cereal availability, high prices (approaching real levels similar to those of the 2005 crisis), and locally extreme food insecurity.

Figure 1. Satellite-derived image of normalized difference vegetation index anomalies compared to the long-term mean (1982-2008), as of October 30, 2009.



Millet prices in October were near the nominal record highs of this time last year on key retail reference markets in Chad, Mali, and Niger. Prices for millet are expected to rise unseasonably during the January – March post-harvest period (three months earlier than normal), requiring abnormal expenditures for the poor, most of whom depend on markets for 25-60 percent of their food. Households that prefer millet will switch to lower-cost alternatives, such as sorghum, maize, tubers, and rice. Competition for these grains between human, industrial, and animal consumption (as an alternative for high-priced animal feed) will drive up the prices of these substitutes.

In spite of exchange rates favorable to importing cereals from Nigeria, purchasing power is expected to be limited in the region between October and March due to significant reductions in cowpea and groundnut production, which constitute a major source of revenue for the agro-pastoral and agricultural poor of southern Niger and far northern Nigeria. In addition, poor pasture conditions are expected to result in below-normal livestock to cereal terms of trade as of January for poor and middle-income households in Chad and for pastoralists in Niger and Mali. Poor agro-pastoralists in Niger and eastern Mali and agricultural households from eastern Niger will intensify labor migration and market gardening between January and March. These strategies are not expected to be sufficient to fill the food gap, and most poor households in the affected areas are beginning to erode their asset bases now to procure stocks in anticipation of next year's access difficulties.

Widespread moderate food insecurity is expected in the northern Sahel throughout the marketing season with localized pockets of highly food-insecure populations in January/March among northern pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in the eastern market basin, particularly Niger. As of April, declining food stocks, rising cereal prices, and falling livestock prices will reduce household purchasing power. High food insecurity will then spread to the poor in pastoral Mali and agro-pastoral Chad through July and deficit agricultural households in Niger through August. The areas affected by significant production deficits need immediate assistance to promote off-season production and to rebuild community cereal and animal feed banks. Every effort should be made to encourage the free movement of cereals across borders. Industrial, institutional, and government cereal procurement should take place before January in order to benefit from the lowest prices and to avoid disturbing prices as households increase market purchases. FEWS NET will closely monitor food export policy in major surplus countries, particularly Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mali, in the coming months.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues alerts to prompt decision-maker action to prevent or mitigate potential or actual food insecurity. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the view of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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