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Agenda item 12. The next Desert Locust emergency – are we ready?

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Overview and background

Climate change is expected to cause an increase in severe weather events such as cyclones and unusually heavy rains that often initiate the development of Desert Locust outbreaks, upsurges and plagues. In the past decade, there has been a substantial increase in the frequency of Desert Locust outbreaks, which may be partially explained by improved detection and reporting methods due to regular surveys and new technologies but it may also be a result of climate change. It is therefore prudent to examine if FAO, donors and affected countries are sufficiently prepared to face an increasing number of future Desert Locust emergencies.

FAO, its Commissions and affected countries implement a preventive control strategy to manage Desert Locust, consisting of permanently monitoring the primary breeding areas and intervening at the first signs of gregarization. However, this does not guarantee the successful control of every outbreak or prevention of upsurges and plagues. An effective Desert Locust plague management strategy requires well-equipped, well-trained national locust control units (NLCUs), timely and well-coordinated actions and inputs from national, regional and international sources, and access to sufficient resources, often at short notice. To address this challenge, locust-affected countries have developed contingency plans under the guidance of the Desert Locust regional commissions to cope with major outbreaks, upsurge and plague. This is supported by financial instruments that can be mobilized at the beginning of and invoked during emergencies. Simulation exercises are undertaken to test preparedness. CLCPRO and CRC established the Locust Risk Prevention Plans (LRPP) and National Locust Emergency Plans (NLEP) at national and regional levels, reinforced by the Regional Emergency Fund (REF) for Locust Risk Management. In CLCPRO, this is supplemented by the Western Regional Response Force. The Desert Locust Information Service (DLIS) constantly monitors environmental conditions and locust populations based on national survey results to provide forecasts, alerts and early warning of the timing, scale and location of infestations and breeding.

Two major constraints are the lack of attention by affected countries during recession periods and a lack of investment to maintain and further improve national capacity. NLCUs often maintain limited staff and control capacities during periods of low locust activity. Updated inventories of available resources and additional staff are often not known at the onset of an emergency. The NLCUs are often slow in mobilizing additional capacities on short notice and request external assistance too late.

Points for discussion and decisions

- Is the current strategy of preventive control sustainable?
- Does locust information help to anticipate and better manage locust emergencies?
- How can regular monitoring and surveys be improved and maintained?
- How can insecure or areas of difficult access be addressed?
- Does non-payment of Member States' contributions affect locust emergencies?
- How to ensure sufficient pesticides in emergencies without accumulating obsolete stocks?
- How to ensure better coordination between the regional and international levels?