

FAO issues warning on southern Africa maize shortfall

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has issued a [warning](#) that cereal production prospects in Southern Africa have taken a sharp turn for the worse since last February.



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The foreseen shortfall in production, especially for maize, is expected to intensify households' food insecurity, push up domestic prices and spur a surge in import needs across the subregion, according to a new assessment from FAO's [Global Information and Early Warning System](#). White maize accounts for almost 20% of calories consumed in the subregion.

The disappointing forecast comes after "widespread and substantial rainfall deficits in February, exacerbated by record high temperatures, a particularly damaging combination for crops," the report said, noting that there are scant hopes of a recovery before the harvest period commences in May.

Acute food insecurity in southern Africa, estimated at 16 million people in the first three months of 2024, could deteriorate in late 2024, FAO warned.

Food prices, already rising at annual rates above 10%, are likely to rise further and, based on current projections, South Africa and Zambia, typically maize exporters, will not be able to cover the supply shortfall, and Zambia has started importing maize to meet the shortfall.

This combination of reduced harvests and rising food prices is particularly harmful for agricultural households and restoration of production,, as farm incomes are set to be squeezed while more resources will be needed to purchase food, said Jonathan Pound, economist at FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System.

Plan ahead for the shift to La Niña

This observed pattern is typical of the El Niño weather phenomenon in the region, FAO noted.

Current forecasts however point a high likelihood of a transition to a La Niña phase later in the year, with more beneficial precipitation patterns.

That makes it "imperative" to scale up resilience-bolstering measures enabling farmers to prepare adequately for the next agricultural season starting in September 2024, FAO said.

The governments of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe have already declared drought emergencies. Teaming up with the NASA Harvest programme, FAO geospatial observations suggest that key cereal crops will suffer adverse impacts in parts of Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, with Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique expected to see a notable jump in import needs.

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