



agriculture, forestry & fisheries

Department:
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

MEDIA RELEASE

1 FEBRUARY 2017

PEST ALERT: DETECTION OF A NEW PEST CATERPILLAR FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF) received several reports from farmers of an unidentified Lepidoptera pest causing damage to maize between 16 and 27 January 2017. However the pest was observed on maize by some South African producers since December 2016.

The species is similar in appearance to the Fall Army Worm (FAW) or *Spodoptera frugiperda*. Little is known on how this particular pest entered Southern Africa. DAFF collected caterpillar specimens of a new moth species on maize that appears to be a new pest for South Africa. Scientists from Agricultural Research Council (ARC) together with the North West University also collected samples for identification. The insect must complete its life cycle before a positive identification will be made by the ARC Biosystematics Division. The life cycle of FAW from egg to adult (moth) takes is 24 -40 days depending on weather conditions and available food. The identification process will commence once the moths has emerge from pupae. The pest identification will be verified by a recognized specialist in the taxonomy of the relevant insect group.

Fall Army Worm is native to South and Central America and also occurs in the southern states of the USA. The FAW was first detected on the African continent in 2016 approximately a year ago when it was reported from Nigeria and it spread to several other West African countries and to Central Africa by April 2016.

The moths are good flyers and wind currents may play a role in assisting them to disperse over large distances. Since this pest is very new in Africa, very little is known on its long term effects. It may become a migratory pest similarly to the African Army worm and may migrate in large numbers form one area to another causing great damage. This pest has a wide host range and can affect crops such as maize, sorghum, soybeans, groundnuts and potatoes.

Extensive damage reported so far in South Africa is mainly on sweetcorn and on white maize planted for seed production. The pest responsible for the damage was reported from all the districts of the Limpopo Province, and in the North West

Province between Swartruggens and Mahikeng as well as Lichtenburg. If this pest is indeed the FAW, it could be disastrous, particularly to maize production.

DAFF already met with role players from various industries and research organisations on 25 January 2017 to determine a plan of action. The first step of the contingency plan is to confirm the identification of the pest. Once the identity of the pest is confirmed an emergency control strategy will be implemented. We want to ensure accurate information is provided to producers regarding the type of pest, pesticide control and on farm management of the pest. The biggest danger is incorrect farm management of the pest which can lead to pesticide resistance and further production losses.

DAFF collaborated with role players from various industry organizations to develop an interim control and awareness program. It is already known that the FAW is resistant to some pyrethroids and emergency registration of agricultural chemicals may be essential to control the pest. This pest becomes more difficult to control as maize plants mature as the caterpillars feed inside the leaf whorl outside the reach of pesticides. Farmers should be on the lookout for new caterpillars on their maize especially in the whorl of the leaves. The interim control program was already communicated to industry members on Friday 27 January 2017.

Crop producers are encouraged to report suspected detection of this pest to the Department. Please report to Jan Hendrik Venter at: 012 3196384, 0723488431 or janhendrikv@daff.gov.za. Please contact a chemical representative to advise with control options.

Photos supplied by Desiree Van Heerden from Sygenta

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