Armyworm strikes again

Edward Rwajokare showing some of the maize destroyed by the fall armyworm in his garden in Wakiso district last week. Photo By Gerald Tenywa

AFFECTED AREAS

The outbreaks reported in Rubanda and Amudat, which are close to Rwanda and Kenya suggest that the pest could have migrated from the neighboring countries

By Gerald Tenywa

Uganda has yet again been invaded by uninvited guests. The migratory fall armyworm, a pest that destroys maize, has been detected in Rubanda, southwestern Uganda and Amudat in northeastern Uganda.

"We have got reports from farmers about fresh attacks of crops planted this season," said Stephen Byantwale, a commissioner in charge of crop protection in the Ministry of Water and Environment.

"The rainy season has come with strong winds and this could have helped the movement of the fall armyworm into Uganda," he said.

The outbreaks reported in Rubanda and Amudat, which are close to Rwanda and Kenya, suggest that the pest could have migrated from the neighbouring countries, but experts, including Byantwale, have not ruled out the fact that the armyworm remained undetected in different parts of Uganda during the dry season. The armyworm has been confirmed in neighbouring Rwanda, Kenya and Ethiopia.

Prefers maize

Byantwale said the armyworm, which was first detected in Uganda in 2016 and caused havoc last year, is a migratory pest. He also said the pest feeds on 80 different crops, but maize happens to be its highest preference.

"The moment maize is not available, the fall armyworm shifts to other plants," Byantwale said, adding that the farmers may not have detected it since it was eating on other plants in the dry season.

"As farmers plant maize following the onset of the rain, the outbreak of the armyworm is being detected."

The commissioner for relief, disaster preparedness and management, Martin Owor, said the agriculture ministry had not contacted them over the matter.

Affected maize

Fao advice

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in February released a guide on how to deal with the fall armyworm.

The guide, which was launched in February in Rome, offers an integrated, ecological sustainable way of dealing with the pest.

"We know that farmer education and community action are critical in best managing FAW and curbing its spread as much as possible," said Maria Helena Semedo, FAO deputy director general.

"The guide builds on the experiences of farmers and researchers from South America who have been dealing with the pest for centuries as well on new technology and lessons learnt so far in Africa. It gives African farmers and frontline agricultural workers the practical advice they need to tackle armyworm head-on," he added.

MIGRATORY PEST

Stephen Byantwale, a commissioner in charge of crop protection in the Ministry of Water and Environment, said the armyworm, which was first detected in Uganda in 2016 and caused havoc last year is a migratory pest. He said the pest feeds on 80 different crops, but maize happens to be its highest preference.

EFFECT

Outbreaks of the fall armyworm could cause losses between 30% and 40% of the maize crop and this translates to $200m (Sh74b) loss for farmers

Undertake routine checks

Byantwale said farmers should apply chemicals as a last resort when other options fail. "Do not rush into spraying chemicals," he said.

Spraying should be considered when the armyworm has affected 20 out of 100 crops, according to Byantwale.

"The worm puts holes in the leaves of maize," he said.

He advised the farmers to undertake routine checks for eggs in their crops (maize) and that they should destroy them immediately. He also said the caterpillars should be destroyed to reduce the population of the worm.

"We cannot eliminate the fall armyworm, but we can minimise the damage it causes," Byantwale said.

He said in case the situation gets out of hand, the Government is prepared to support the farmers in an emergency response. He also said training is being organised on April 9 for extension workers on how to work with farmers to fight the fall armyworm.

"We also put traps with pheromones that attract the moth (adult fall armyworms) as part of our early warning systems," he said, adding that farmers should also report to extension workers and the Government authorities when an outbreak occurs.

Scientists, according to Byantwale, have discovered parasites on the bodies of the fall armyworm and fungus on the dead caterpillars.

Supporting farmers

He said they have isolated a parasitoid which is an organism that lives on or in host organism and ultimately kills the host. "We need about a year to get a biological enemy to fight the armyworm," he said.

Previous encounters with the fall armyworm did not cause significant losses to the farmers in Uganda. This, according to Byantwale, is because the heavy rains washed down the caterpillars and eggs off the plants.

However, outbreaks of the fall armyworm could cause losses between 30% and 40% of the maize crop and this translates to $200m (sh7.4b) loss for Ugandan farmers.