

Drought Devastates Wheat Crop

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A severe drought is threatening Syrian agriculture and reducing the country's wheat reserves, according to farmers and agricultural experts.

The agriculture ministry now predicts that the country will produce only three million tons of wheat this year, a sharp fall on the 4.7 million tons initially projected.

Experts blame a ten-month-long drought, the worst the country has faced since a devastating drought in 1990-91.

The drought has primarily affected northeastern Syria, the main agricultural area. Al-Hasaka, a key farming province, received only 20 to 25 per cent of its average rainfall in 2007 and 2008, the state-run newspaper Al-Thawra said in May.

In the prime wheat-growing areas, rainfall has averaged between 15 and 30 per cent of normal levels, according to a report by the United States Department of Agriculture. Wheat accounts for over 80 per cent of Syrian cereal crops, according to the US agency, with 75 per cent of the production concentrated in the northeast.

The ongoing drought, coupled with a heat wave last spring, have devastated not only agriculture but also livestock, which are heavily dependent on grain fodder.

Nearly 30 per cent of the Syrian population is employed in farming.

Despite a government decision to raise domestic grain prices earlier this year, many farmers are facing unemployment due to the drought. Some have simply walked away from their farms.

"The wheat crops were totally destroyed totally this season," said Omar Muhammed, a 50-year-old wheat farmer in al-Hasaka. "It doesn't look like next season will be better, but we are hoping it will. We will pray for rain to fall in the autumn."

The pro-government website DamasPost reported on June 29 that Syria is running short of emergency wheat reserves because of the drought. Deputy economy minister Abdulkhaleq al-Ani announced in February that Syria had sufficient reserves to last through 2009, but these have now shrunk to cover only several months, Damas Post said.

Agricultural experts say the drought is hitting Syria hard because its irrigation systems are so poor.

The US agriculture department says only 45 per cent of wheat crops are irrigated, while Syria's own

National Agricultural Policy Centre estimated in 2005 that one-fifth of the total arable area has irrigation.

As rivers and wells run low and demand for water increases in cities, there is less available to irrigate crops

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation warned in a 2006 symposium that agriculture was too reliant on groundwater and inefficient irrigation systems, and that modernisation projects were "falling short" of the government's expectations.

In an interview with the TV station Al-Dunya in April, Irrigation Minister Nadir al-Buni called for new irrigation systems, with the northeast a priority.

Sawsan Suleiman, an agriculture expert at Tishreen University in Latakia, said some crops such as maize had not been as badly affected by the water shortage because they are in well irrigated fields.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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