

Armyworms on march a threat to all SA

Maize farmer Adele Prinsloo is in a panic. The entire crop on her 100ha farm has been overrun by the devastating fall armyworm. The Prinsloos live only 40km from the Pretoria CBD.



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The department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has activated an emergency team to help fight the plague and is advising on pesticides to be used. Today the department's minister, Senzeni Zokwana, will brief the media on the outbreak which could devastate the country's maize harvest if not contained.

Armyworm larvae can defoliate entire plants, leaving behind only barren stalks as they sweep through large areas of farmland.

That's what the Prinsloos and her six workers are battling after her employees sounded the alarm a week ago. They noticed the maize crop being eaten and reported the devastation to Prinsloo's son, Jacques. Faced with the unknown pest, the owners of Bon Accord farm, north of Pretoria, had no idea what they were up against. Their immediate response was to stock up on at least seven pesticides, costing about R40,000, but the pests were not eradicated.

Adele Prinsloo drove to Vaalwater in Limpopo to get what she had been told might work. She will know after three days if the caterpillar poison for which she paid R4,800 for 5.4kg has any effect.

But while this may kill the worms, there is nothing left to save on her farm.

"We have tried every poison we know but these things just won't die. We have invested R400,000 in this crop. The entire crop is infested, the loss runs to R1-million. It is bad," Jacques said.

"Last season was the drought. Now we have rain and then you get this. We are finished."

Samples collected from the Prinsloos' farm by Agricultural Research Council scientists have confirmed that the fall armyworm identified in Pretoria is of the same species as that ravaging Limpopo.

The pests have decimated crops in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, and have spread to other southern African countries, including Namibia and Mozambique. So far the damage has been limited mainly to yellow maize varieties and sweetcorn.

Source: The Times

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