Current good agroclimatic conditions in the Sahel are helping the 2003-04 growing season get off to a good start.

SUMMARY

Good climatic conditions in the Sahel have helped the growing season to get underway and develop on schedule. The planting of rainfed millet, sorghum, maize and rice crops in all major farming areas of Sahelian countries, which has been in progress since May, is just about finished. In general, rainfall amounts for July were near or above normal in all major farming areas. As a result, crops are generally in good condition. Moreover, thanks to these good agroclimatic conditions, the state of vegetation is above average, improving grazing conditions for migratory animal herds and food security conditions for herders. Furthermore, the good progress of the rainy season is stabilizing prices and keeping them below last year’s levels. The good progress of farming activities underway at this time should reinforce the current downward trend in grain prices over the weeks ahead, improving food access for most rural households dependent on local markets for their food supplies.

I. BIOPHYSICAL CONDITIONS

1. RAINFALL

Thus far, agroclimatic conditions for the 2003-04 growing season have been good. The Intertropical Convergence Zone, which marks the northern boundary of rainfall in the Sahel, was positioned at 19.1 degrees north latitude as of the end of July, which is 0.9 degrees north of its normal position at this time of year. Thus, the rainfall outlook for the month of August is promising.

The spatio-temporal distribution of rainfall since the beginning of the rainy season has been fairly regular.
Seasonal rainfall totals as of July 20th ranged from 50 mm in southern Mauritania and the northern reaches of the Sahelian countries to over 800 mm in the southern part of the Gulf of Guinea coastal states and Nigeria (Map 1).

On the whole, cumulative seasonal rainfall totals (as of July 20th) were near-normal, and even above-normal in the Sahelian belt. As usual, the Western Sahel is the sole exception, where cumulative rainfall totals are well below normal (Map 2).

There are reports of what, in many cases, are large rainfall deficits throughout southern Mauritania, Senegal, western Mali and the Gulf of Guinea countries. Thus far, the effects of these rainfall deficits have been offset by the good temporal distribution of rainfall.

A look at rainfall estimates for each dekad of July shows plentiful, evenly distributed rainfall early in the month (July 1-10). Rainfall totals for the first dekad of July were up
from the previous period (June 21-30, 2003) and above-normal in all Sahelian countries with the sole exception of Senegal (Table 1).

The lower rainfall amounts in the second and third dekads of July (July 11-20, 2003 and July 21-31, 2003) were still good enough to allow farming activities to move ahead and on schedule (Tables 2 and 3).

In general, these good climatic conditions helped the growing season get off to a good start and move ahead and on schedule, except in areas with unusually large rainfall deficits. The planting of rainfed millet, sorghum, maize and rice crops in all major farming areas of Sahelian countries, which has been in progress since May, is just about finished. This year’s good agrometeorological conditions are encouraging farmers to plant larger areas in crops. Thus, the size of the area under crops and the number of successful plantings are visibly up from last year, when the rainy season got off to an especially late start. Early
planted millet and sorghum crops are in the height growth stage and are generally in good condition.

Plant health conditions are relatively calm throughout the Sahel with the regular pattern of rainfall. There are no reports of any major crop infestations anywhere except in Guinea Bissau, which is reporting grasshopper infestations (150 to 250 larvae per square meter) in Bafata, Kinara and Pirados provinces. The country is seeking US$ 2.8 million in emergency aid to treat these infestations.

2. CONDITION OF VEGETATION

The condition of vegetation in all livestock-raising areas is adequate, thanks to the regular pattern of rainfall. Normalized Difference Vegetation Indexes for mid-July of this year (July 11-20, 2003) show a clear improvement from the previous period (July 1-10, 2003) and are running ahead of the historical average for 1982-2000 (Table 4).

In line with the improvement in the condition of vegetation and the gradual replenishment of surface water resources, the weights of animals ensconced in seasonal grazing areas are generally satisfactory.

II. MARKETS

Market supplies in rural areas tend to run low at this time of year, known as the “lean period”, due to small carry-over inventories from previous seasons. The lean period is the pre-harvest period when grain reserves from previous harvests are already depleted and fresh crops are not yet available. Grain prices tend to peak at this time of year, creating serious grain access problems for most rural households dependent on local markets for their food supplies. This year, adequate market supplies of imported grains (primarily rice and maize) and, more importantly, the good progress of the 2003-04 growing season has stabilized prices to some extent and even triggered a downswing in prices early in the season. A look at average millet prices on selected retail markets around the Sahel shows current price
levels down from last year. Better yet, average millet prices on certain markets such as the Niamey market in Niger are well below the average price levels for the last five years (Figure 1). The good harvest forecasts for the current growing season should reinforce this downward trend in prices in the weeks ahead.

**Figure 1: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE JULY PRICES FOR MILLET ON SELECTED MARKETS IN THE SAHEL**

Items of note:

The monitoring networks (CILSS, FAO, FEWS NET and WFP) for the Sahel region have approved the following schedule of technical meetings to assess and discuss the 2003-04 growing season and food situation:

SEPTEMBER 2003 (September 15-19, in Niamey): Regional meeting to monitor farming conditions and the food situation and examine harvest forecasts for the 2003/04 growing season in the Sahel.

OCTOBER 2003 (October 8-31, 2003): Joint CILSS/FAO harvest assessment missions in the nine CILSS countries, with assistance from FEWS NET.

NOVEMBER 2003 (November 3-7, in Bissau): Restricted technical meeting of experts in harvest assessment and the development of grain balance sheets.

DECEMBER 2003 (December 7-8, in Nouakchott): Meeting of the Sahelian Food Crisis Prevention Network on the occasion of the Summit of Heads of State of CILSS countries.