

ZIMBABWE Food Security Warning

January 22, 2007

Erratic start of season and poor forecast raise concern over 2006/07 harvest

Despite an early start to this season's rains, their poor distribution thus far and the forecast for below average rains for the remainder of the season have fueled concerns of below average maize production this year. While seed availability has been adequate, supplies of fertilizer and fuel have not. In rural areas, at least 1.4 million people (ZimVac June, 2006) have been food insecure during the current hunger period (September – February). Food assistance programs by the World Food Programme, C-Safe and others have provided food aid to 500,000 of the most vulnerable people.

Rains began up to six weeks early, before many farmers were prepared for planting (Figure 1). In some areas, the early start was a false one, followed by dry periods of up to twenty days, and farmers had to wait for rains to resume in order to replant (Figure 2). Although cumulative rainfall has been normal over most of the country, it has not been well timed or well distributed. Much of the rain was brought by intensive thunderstorms over relatively small areas. The forecast for the remainder of the season is not favorable. An El Niño, which is sometimes associated with reduced rainfall in southern Africa, was detected in September, and is likely to continue into early 2007. Given the erratic start of season, the less than optimistic forecast for the remainder of the season, and the limited access to some key inputs, there is reason to be concerned about the 2006/07 maize harvest.

The harvest of winter wheat, a significant proportion of which was planted late, was disrupted by fuel shortages and the early rains. Winter wheat production will be below average and not expected to exceed 135,000 MT, and the country will have to import 265,000 MT of wheat to meet domestic needs.

The hunger season will continue until the green harvest begins in February. In rural areas, household stocks of maize, sorghum and millet are approaching their lowest levels, and many households are now relying on the market for their food needs. Maize grain has generally been available in central and northern districts of the country, but by November it was already scarce in the south.

In urban areas, maize meal was readily available, but very expensive, until the second week of December, when supplies became erratic in several towns, including Bulawayo, Mutare, and Chipinge. Bread has also become scarce following disagreements between the Government and the country's bakers over the controlled price of bread, which bakers now find unprofitable to produce.

Figure 1. Start of season anomaly 2006/07

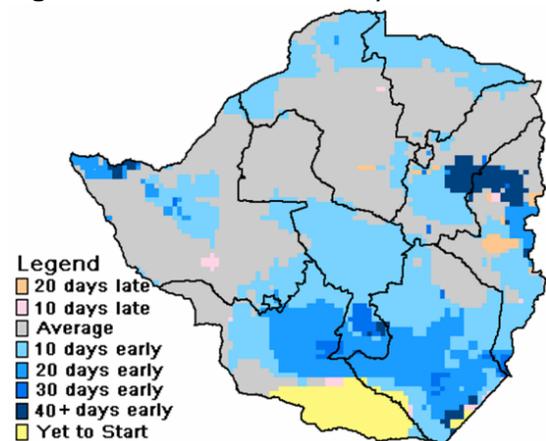
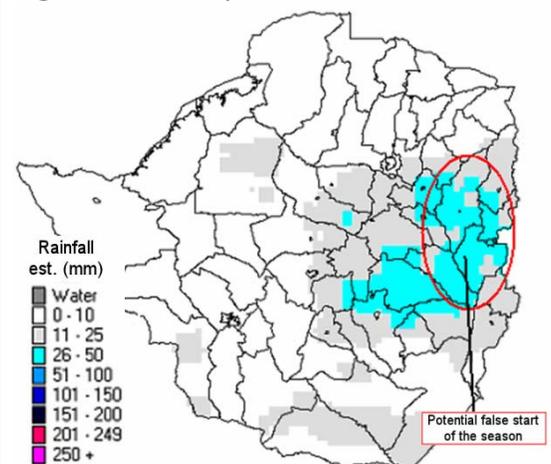


Figure 2. Area of potential false start of season



Source: USGS

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues periodic warnings when population groups are now, or about to become, highly food insecure, unable to meet their own food needs during the given consumption period and will be forced to reduce consumption, dispose of their productive assets and take increasingly irreversible actions that undermine their future food security.

Rural and urban households are still struggling to earn enough income to purchase food and other necessities. The official annual rate of inflation was 1,098.8 percent in November. The figure went up to 1,281.1 percent in December. Between November and December 2006 the food poverty line rose by about 45 percent and the economy is officially estimated to have shrunk by 2.5 percent in 2006. This brings the overall decline of Gross Domestic Product for Zimbabwe over the period 2000 to 2006 to about 24 percent.

Timeline of current events

