

Average food assistance needs anticipated for 2011/12, concentrated in Tillabéri

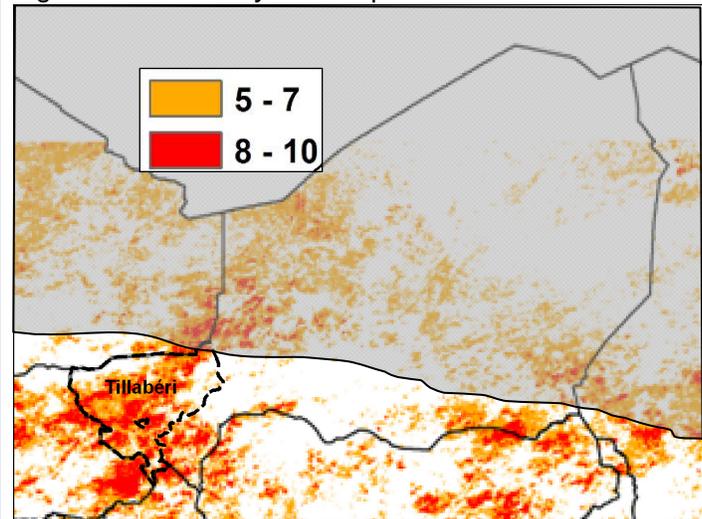
The 2011 rains arrived late with significant dry spells in June and July, leading to late sowing and slow crop development in many cropping areas of Niger. However, most surplus-producing areas of the country received sufficient rain in August and September, both in quantity and distribution, to recover from the erratic start of season. As a result, a near-average 2011/12 rainfed cereal harvest in Niger remains likely, with localized deficits concentrated in Tillabéri region. Overall needs for emergency food assistance in Niger are also expected to be near average for the 2011/12 consumption year, though at a sub-national level, above average needs are expected in the west.

Following a poor start of season in 2011, many households in Tillabéri and elsewhere adapted to the shorter season by switching from cereal production to shorter-cycle cash crops, such as cowpea, melon, and squash. As a result, no major decline in income from crop sales or agricultural labor is yet expected, even in Tillabéri region. Furthermore, media reports of stem borers threatening cereal production in the surplus millet-producing region of Maradi have not been substantiated by recent field assessments. Even in Aguié, the epicenter of reported pest attacks, the magnitude of losses is approximately 15 percent, only slightly greater than normal. In general, harvests in Maradi are likely to be average to above average with some areas even surpassing last years' record-high production. Finally, in mid October, grasshoppers were reported virtually nationwide. The arrival of grasshoppers is a normal, seasonal event that takes place as the rains move southward. Their arrival, even in larger numbers than usual, does not have an impact on crop production if grains are already mature, as was the case in Tahoua, Maradi, Zinder, and Diffa regions. Only in Tillabéri, where significantly below-average cereal production was already expected and some millet was still maturing, are additional yield losses of up to 15 percent due to grasshopper attacks likely. Harvests are expected to be roughly 50 percent of average in most areas of Tillabéri.

In spite of poor production in Tillabéri region, FEWS NET expects a near-average 2011/12 rainfed cereal harvest in Niger (3.7 – 4.0 million metric tons). This assessment of harvest prospects is supported by evidence collected from field assessments, producers, and government technicians and appears to be shared by traders, as prices for millet in September were generally below last year's levels and falling seasonably or stable in anticipation of delayed harvests. As a part of effective contingency planning, in September the Ministry of Agriculture financed a market-gardening input support program to compensate for any possible national cereal deficit up to 400,000 tons. Unfortunately, these preparations for an unrealized worst-case scenario have been widely misinterpreted as an official assertion of national cereal deficits.

Production in other parts of West Africa is also expected to be average, particularly Benin and Nigeria, which are important sources of regional food imports for Niger. In addition, the 2010/11 harvest was so good that carryover stocks among large producers and traders are expected to be significantly above average across the Sahel. Throughout Maradi, Zinder, and Dosso, many producers reported to FEWS NET that they were waiting as long as four to six weeks beyond normal crop

Figure 1. Areas in Niger facing 5-7 or 8-10 dekads of poor vegetation conditions, June 1 - September 10, 2011*



* This map shows the number of dekads between June 1 and September 10, 2011 during which the Vegetation Condition Index was less than 20 percent of the maximum. The Vegetation Condition Index is an indicator of the relative vigor of the vegetation in response to moisture conditions with respect to the ecologically-defined minimum and maximum limits of Normalized Difference Vegetation Index values (2001-2010).

Source: USGS/FEWS NET

maturity to harvest crops in order to have enough room in storage to hold the new harvest. Carryover stocks are, therefore, expected to continue to supply markets at least in the early part of the 2011/12 consumption year. No widespread, unseasonable price increases for millet, sorghum, or maize are therefore expected over the coming consumption year.

Based on the analysis outlined above, **FEWS NET expects overall needs for emergency food assistance in Niger to be near average for the 2011/12 consumption year.** On average, over the past five years (2005/06 – 2010/11) 3.4 million people have been identified by the national Early Warning System (*Système d'Alerte Précoce*) as vulnerable to food insecurity during their annual June assessment.

Assistance needs will be above average in Tillaberi region, particularly agropastoral areas, except in the department of Ouallam. Acute food insecurity in Tillaberi will peak seasonably between June and August 2012 and will be more severe than in an average year. However, this food insecurity is not likely to exceed Crisis levels (IPC Phase 3). “Crisis” means that without assistance, at least 20 percent of households in the area will not be able to meet their minimum food needs or will do so by using extreme coping strategies. Levels of acute malnutrition, which are chronically high in these areas, would likely increase beyond typical seasonal levels.

While cereal production deficits in western Niger are substantial and needs there will be above-average, not all affected households will face household-level food insecurity. Half of the affected area in Tillaberi is a surplus-producing zone where households tend to harvest more food than is needed for household consumption. Also, labor migration is a key source of income in this part of the country and will be more intense than usual this year as a key coping strategy. Migration of long-term migrants to Côte d’Ivoire in particular rebounded quickly with the fall of Laurent Gbagbo in April 2011, and seasonal migration is expected to follow the same relatively normal trend. Finally, a more detailed analysis of livelihoods in Ouallam department showed that—unlike neighboring departments of Tera, Tillaberi, and Fillengué—sales of specialized grasses, firewood and migrant labor for market purchases are significantly more important than agricultural production as a food source. The analysis indicated that even with agricultural production less than half of average and cereal prices as high as during the 2008/09 price crisis, most very poor households are expected to meet livelihood protection and survival needs without assistance or negative coping strategies.

These projections assume average trade flows with Nigeria, no significant substitution effects due to increases in the price of imported rice, no significant locust attacks, and average labor demand in Côte d’Ivoire and other neighboring countries. New information which changes these assumptions, or other, unanticipated factors, could significantly change this outlook analysis. FEWS NET will publish a Food Security Outlook for October 2011 through March 2012 later this month. Additional analysis of the impact of below-average pastoral conditions in Tahoua department is also expected before the end of the year.