

Summary

Rainfall during the first dekad of September was light, irregular, and poorly distributed throughout the country. Some areas received no rainfall at all. Cumulative rainfall was below the long-term average (1961-1990) in about two-thirds of the weather stations. An extended dry spell has affected all the agricultural zones of Niger, starting the second dekad of August and lasting between 15 to 30 days. The government's agricultural statistics service reported that the dry spell has jeopardized crop development. In some areas crops have reached the permanent wilting point and dried out, making this dry spell an agronomic drought.

Crop development is not uniform due to irregular and poorly distributed rainfall. Several areas are likely to have below average to poor harvests due to a combination of delayed planting, inadequate rainfall, dry spells and pest attacks. The principal areas of concern include Diffa Department, the arrondissements of Tchintabaraden (Tahoua Department), Ouallam, Filingue and Tillabéry (Tillabéry Department); Tanout and Goure (Zinder Department) in which some millet and sorghum withered and died.

Last month, FEWS NET reported the different production scenarios by the Ministry of Agriculture, depending on whether the rains ended on September 15 or 30. Both scenarios were premised on the timely and adequate availability of water. Millet and sorghum, the principal food crops, require rain spread over a minimum period in order to reach maturity. Given the threat of agronomic drought, crop production could be lower than the previous estimates of either scenario since the current dry spell occurred in some areas at the critical flowering and grain filling stages.

On September 15, the Ministry of Commerce increased the prices of fuel for the second time in the past four months, bringing the total increase to 25% for regular gasoline and 21% for super. The price of kerosene, which the rural population uses for lighting, was left unchanged this time. The first fuel price increase provoked discontent among transporters, but there were no reactions to the recent price increase, which was carried out in consultation with transporters, traders, consumers, and SONIDEP (the government parastatal organization with the monopoly to import gasoline). The full impact of the price increase will certainly be reflected in price increases of cereals and other transported goods in the months, especially if a poor harvest materializes and imports are needed to be fill any deficit.

Cereal prices through the end of August, the most recently available, do not mirror current concerns about lower crop production. Millet prices appear to be stabilizing or decreasing throughout the country, except in Diffa Department. This price behavior could be partly due to the release of about 8,000 MT of older millet stocks held by the National Food Products Office (OPVN) at low prices into markets all around the country; these millet sales are still going on. Stable millet prices could also reflect the two consecutive harvests in 1998 and 1999 and the availability of adequate millet coming from Burkina Faso and Mali.

The National Security Stock now holds only 11,600 MT of cereals, compared to its target level of 40,000 MT. Given the current prospects for a lower harvest, it may prove difficult for OPVN to buy cereals in Niger if an emergency response is needed.

During the first dekad of September, Niger experienced large infestations of grasshoppers, stem borers, flower insects, and grain-eating birds that also feed on groundnuts and cowpeas.

1. Food Availability

1.1. Cereal Stocks

Cereal stocks held by public organizations are levels are low but not necessarily worrisome, in view of the approaching harvest that will supply the market. As of September 20, Niger's National Security Stock (SNS), that is supposed to be built up to a level of 40,000 MT of cereals, held approximately 11,600 MT. The rice parastatal, *Riz du Niger* (RINI), held 1,605 MT of various types of rice. The World Food Program held 6,895 MT of cereals, plus other foods. Japan announced the delivery of 5,000 MT of rice food aid, expected in September, to be sold on the market.

Active markets, including trade with Nigeria along the southern border, are expected to meet cereal and other food staple needs. However, cereal imports from Burkina Faso are likely to be reduced this year, given the impact of extended dry spells on production there.

1.2. The 2000/2001 Agricultural Season

1.2.1. Rainfall

Rainfall during the first dekad of September was light, irregular, and poorly distributed throughout the country. Some areas received no rainfall at all. Cumulative rainfall as of September 10 was lower than cumulative rainfall at the same dekad in 1999 in 91% of the rainfall stations and lower than the long-term dekadal average (1961-1990) in 65% of the rainfall stations. None of the key farming stations in Maradi, Dosso, Tahoua and Zinder Departments received more than 40 mm of rainfall during the dekad.

1.2.2. Agricultural Conditions

Planting this season started as early as the beginning of May and continued until the first of week of August, depending on the agricultural zone. Crop development is not uniform due to widely different planting dates, but also due to the irregularity and poor distribution of rains.

An extended dry spell, starting the second dekad of August and lasting between 15 to 30 days, has affected all the agricultural zones of Niger. The government's agricultural statistics service reported that the dry spell has jeopardized crop development. In some areas crops have completely dried out, making this dry spell an agronomic drought.

In some areas the drought came at a critical time when the crops were at the emergence or grain filling stage. Several areas are likely to have below average to poor harvests due to a combination of delayed planting, inadequate rainfall, dry spells and pest attacks. The principal areas of concern include Diffa Department, the arrondissements of Tchintabaraden (Tahoua Department), Ouallam, Filingue and Tillabéry (Tillabéry Department); Tanout and Goure (Zinder Department) in which some millet and sorghum withered and died.

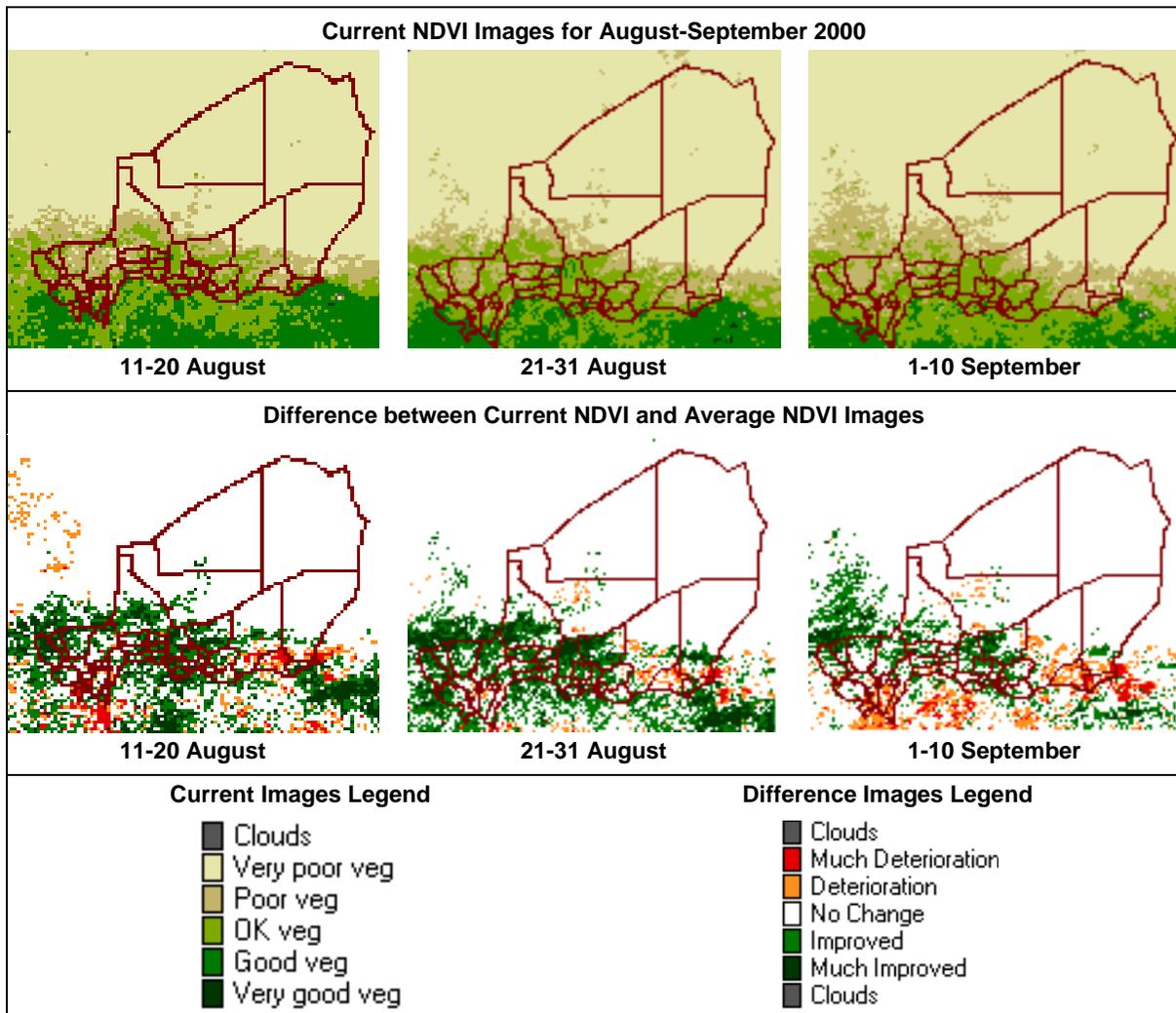
Nationwide, the most common stage of development in millet is flowering (36% of all crops, according to the agricultural statistic service) and the most advanced stage is grain filling and maturation (13%). Crops that are at the stage of flowering and which are not affected by the drought need four weeks to complete their vegetative cycle. However, it is not less certain that the rains will continue until the end of September. Normally, they end earlier in mid-September. Even for crops that are at the end of their cycle, the weak rains during the first dekad of September could lead to the premature drying of millet and the invasion of crop pests.

Last month, FEWS NET reported the different production scenarios by the Ministry of Agriculture, depending on whether the rains ended on September 15 or 30. These scenarios, however, were premised on timely and adequate availability of water. Millet and sorghum, the principal food crops, require rain spread over a minimum period in order to reach maturity. Given the present dry spell and threat of agronomic drought, crop production could be lower than the previous estimates of either scenario, given the timing of the dry spell in the plant growth and development cycle.

1.3. Pasture Conditions

Overall animal health is good for now but is likely to worsen because the situation in the pastoral regions is critical. Weather station data indicate below-average precipitation throughout the pasture zone. From Ouallam to Diffa Departments, satellite imagery of vegetation conditions (NDVI) for the first dekad of September show low biomass accumulation in most of the pastoral zone (Figure 1) and decreasing vegetation compared to the third dekad of August. There has been a distinct absence of green-up in the northern parts of Tillabéry, Tahoua and Zinder Departments and almost all of Diffa Departments.

Figure 1. Vegetation (NDVI) Conditions in Niger



FEWS NET/Niger; Source: NASA

Herders from the northern regions typically bring their animals to the agricultural zones in Tahoua, Maradi and Zinder Departments for grazing in pastures and foraging on crop residues, but not until after the harvest. However, available pasture this year is average to poor in the agricultural zones and in some cases, very poor. Thus, the early return of animals could cause friction between farmers and herders. In addition, poor pastures in southern Niger could lead to an earlier migration of herders and their animals to Nigeria and Chad, forcing some herders to sell part of their herds to buy grain for the remaining animals and food for themselves.

1.4. Pest Situation

As the Inter-tropical convergence zone (ITCZ) begins to retreat towards the south and the rains subside, conditions are becoming favorable for grasshopper and other pest activity. The first dekad of September was characterized by major infestations across Niger of grasshoppers, stem borers, flower insects, and birds that feed on millet, groundnuts and cowpeas. As of the end of August, the crop protection service reported a total of 203,551 hectares infested of which 33,715 hectares were treated. Aerial and ground treatments are underway.

2. Food Accessibility

2.1. Fuel Price Increases

On September 15, the Minister of Commerce and Industry increased fuel prices by 12% per liter for regular gasoline to 425 CFA francs and by 11% for super gasoline to 515 CFA francs. This is the second increase in the past four months, the first having occurred on May 9. Total increases in fuel prices per liter since May have been 85 CFA francs (25%) for regular and 90 CFA francs (21%) for super. The price of kerosene, which the rural population uses for lighting, was left unchanged this time. According to the Minister of Commerce and Industry, the price increases were due to the appreciation of the dollar against the CFA franc and the increases in the prices of oil on the world market.

The first fuel price increase provoked discontent among transporters, but there were no reactions to the recent price increase, which was carried out in consultation with transporters, traders, consumers, and SONIDEP (the government parastatal organization with the monopoly to import gasoline. The full impact of the price increase will be reflected in price increases of cereals and other transported goods in the coming months, especially if a poor harvest materializes and imports are needed to fill any deficit.

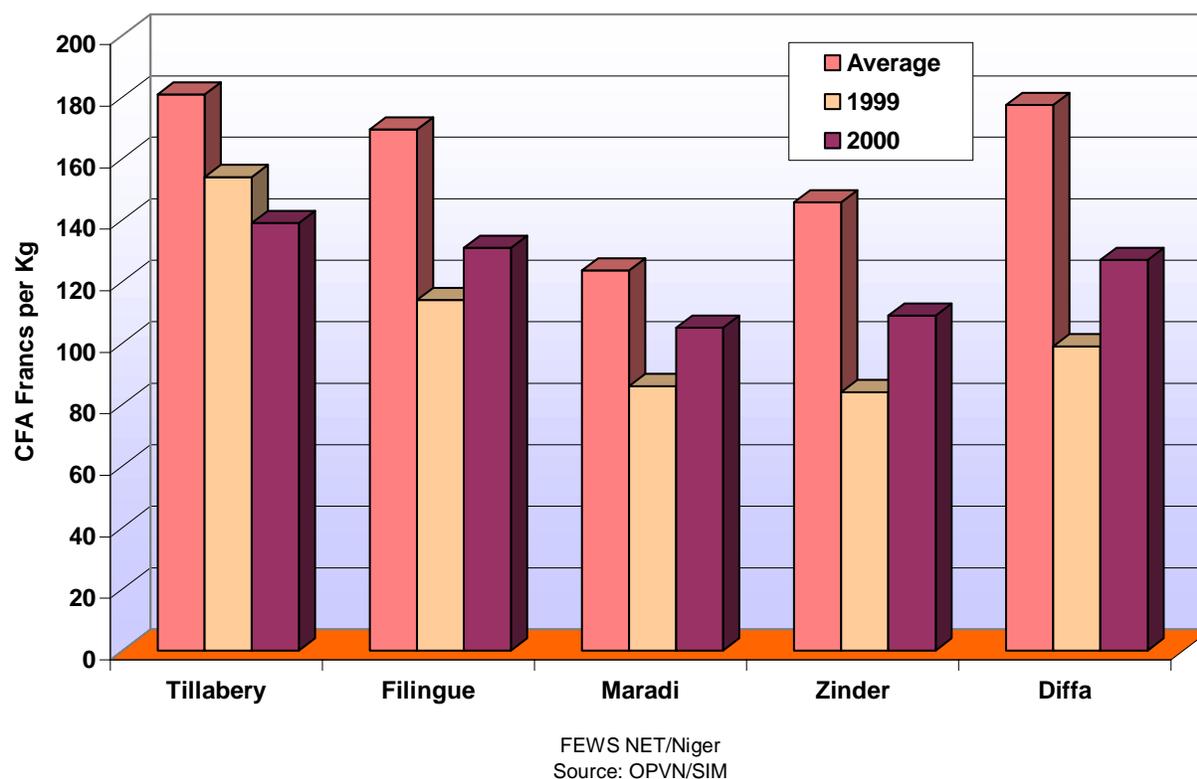
2.2. Markets and Prices

Weekly price information, transmitted via radio from the National Cereals Market Information System (SIM) indicates that August wholesale millet prices remained stable or decreased throughout the country, compared to July, except in Diffa Department. The government and donors intervened in the market through the out-rotation and sale of old millet stocks belonging to the National Food Products Office (OPVN). OPVN sold these old stocks for 8,000 CFA francs per 100-kg sack, compared to the current price of 11-12,000 CFA francs in the market for better quality grain. Despite the anticipation of a poor harvest, OPVN's injection of 8,000 MT of millet into the market and supplies of millet from Burkina Faso and Mali have helped to stabilize or decrease millet prices. This corresponds with normal cereal price trends in Niger where, depending on harvest prospects, prices usually fall from August to December but climb from January through July.

Of the 17 markets for which price data were available for comparison with previous years, August 2000 millet prices were 5-20% higher than prices in August 1999 but much lower than

August prices in 1998, 1997 and 1996 and lower than average (1995-98) August prices (Figure 2). No August price data were available for Kano, the major market in northern Nigeria.

Figure 2. Comparison of August Millet Prices in 2000, 1999 and Average (1995-98) in Nigerien Markets



3. Vulnerability Updates

The Early Warning System (SAP) continues to report, in its September Bulletin, about an increase in indicators of possible food insecurity in Agadez, Maradi, Dosso and Diffa Departments based on conditions in July in the middle of the “hungry period.” These indicators include a reduction in the number of daily meals increasing collection and consumption of “famine foods” and increasing malnutrition of children less than five years old. The SAP also claims that some localities have benefited from the sale of old OPVN grain stocks organized by the government and donors. Such sales in the past benefited mostly traders instead of the vulnerable populations who do not have the purchasing power to buy, even at lower prices.

4. Contingency and Response Planning

As a result of two consecutive years of good production, there is little contingency or response planning underway in Niger. However, the government and donors together have provided 8,000 MT of OPVN millet for subsidized sales around the country. The World Food Program, Catholic Relief Service and Caritas operated food for work activities in Kourfeye (Filingué arrondissement) and other donors continue their regular development programs, including food security.