

Army worm wreaks havoc: Is South Africa under threat?

Across Southern Africa we have seen fall army worms (*Spodoptera frugiperda*) from the United States (US) as well as native African army worms (*Spodoptera exempta*) destroying crops. Outbreaks were experienced in Zambia in late 2016 and have spread ever since.

The main target of army worms is cereal crops and pasture grasses. Fall army worms, unlike African army worms, can also host on many other plants, including oilseeds such as soya beans and groundnuts. Chemical pesticides are effective against both army worm species, in which case the devastation of crops can be controlled.

The cost of chemical application will add to the cost of crop production, but is something which will be unavoidable. The fall army worm has been detected in Limpopo, the Free State and some parts of the North West province. It has been confirmed that genetically modified (GM) maize can be less susceptible to fall army worm.

Poultry industry in crisis

The poultry industry is the single largest agricultural sector in South Africa. It employs an estimated more than 110 000 people directly and indirectly. It is also one of the major consumers of grains and oilseeds.

Currently, this industry could be on the verge of collapse, due to the influx of low-cost chicken imports of unwanted portions of chicken being sent to South Africa at far below the cost of production of a whole chicken in the European Union (EU).

Europe's share in South African bone-in chicken imports has grown from 0,5% in 2012 to over 80% currently. One of the country's largest poultry producers, RCL Foods, recently announced that it will be cutting 1 500 jobs – and still more to come – as a result of having to close operations to prevent further financial losses.

Political intervention required

The temporary imposition of a 13,9% 'safeguard duty' against EU countries, while allegations of dumping are being investigated, will certainly assist the industry. This, however, is not enough to resolve the problem. The reduction in feed raw material costs as a result of returning to normal maize production after a drought, and lower global oilseed prices, will also assist in reducing losses suffered by the industry.

This relief will however take a few months to filter through the system and will not resolve the damage inflicted by imports. Despite numerous talks and investigations, speedy political intervention will be required to save the industry.

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Published by: Plaas Publishing (Pty) Ltd
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Printed and bound by: United Litho
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Published on behalf of:
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