

# Fall Armyworm attacks maize crop across Telangana

## Could infest cotton, sorghum, other crops too, say scientists

KV KURMANATH

Hyderabad, September 12

A fresh problem in the form of Fall Armyworm, or *Spodoptera frugiperda*, threatens farmers across the country this kharif season. Currently infesting the maize crop, agricultural scientists warn that this pest could soon spread and attack other crops, including cotton, sorghum, sugarcane, cabbage and soyabean.

This pest, which reportedly entered India from Africa, could result in huge economic losses if not attended to in time. "From Karnataka where it was reported first, it spread to Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. It can infest 80-100 crops," said an official from Andhra Pradesh.

India grows maize on about 9 million hectares, with a significant amount of the produce going into animal feed. Telangana is among the hardest hit, with the Fall Armyworm extensively affecting the maize crop in 17 out of 30 districts (excluding Hyderabad).

Each worm could lay 900-1,500 eggs. They attack leaves first — the damaged leaves look like they have been cut with scissors.

Scientists say *Spodoptera frugiperda* is not something completely new. "It has been around for quite some time. But the incidence has been extensive as the maize area has gone up significantly. Heavy rainfall in short intervals in several parts of the country provided the ground," said GV Ramanjaneyulu, agricultural scientist and Chief Executive Officer of Centre for Sustainable Agriculture. "Unlike in the past,



The Fall Armyworm, a deadly pest, reportedly entered India from Africa THE HINDU

there are not many varieties now, with farmers going for machine-harvestable maize varieties," he added.

He said there were several alternative management practices that can be deployed to get rid of the problem.

### 'Bt Maize an answer'

"Fall Armyworm is a devastating pest. This can damage crops very heavily. This can also attack other crops like rice and cotton. Farmers, scientists and extension personnel have to be very alert to this new threat," said Ram Kaundinya, Advisor to the Alliance for Agri Innovation, the association of agri-biotech companies.

He said Bt maize can offer a solution to the problem as it did in North and South America. "This is the right time for the Government to think of approving Bt Maize, which has been tested in the country, with regulatory data generated," he said.

Ramanjaneyulu, however, said NPM (non-pesticide management) practices can be a good solution to tackle the problem.

"Introducing Bt maize won't help. In fact, the Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) sprays would help in tackling it. Managing it with chemicals will be very difficult. The government should have taken enough care, seeing the spread on the maize crop this time," he said.