

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

“Pounds of Prevention” is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: LOCUSTS

Desert locusts can mean disaster for millions of people whose livelihoods depend on farming in more than 65 countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia. With the right conditions, these insects form dense swarms that quickly devour crops and pasture land, leaving people and animals without enough food to eat. Farmers can see a year’s worth of work and sometimes sole means of supporting their families destroyed in moments.

In general, good rainfall, moist soil, and warm temperatures create ideal breeding grounds for locusts. In addition, plentiful vegetation leads to greater numbers of locusts reaching adulthood, which increases the likelihood that they will form swarms. Swarms can include tens of millions of locusts. Wherever they land, crop or pasture loss can be 100 percent within hours.

Just as the weather can be forecast, USAID contends that favorable locust conditions can be forecast. By working together with many international, national, and local groups, USAID is investing in monitoring, early warning, and early action to control locusts and prevent them from causing massive damage to the livelihoods of vulnerable communities.

Chief among the activities that USAID supports is a U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization program to strengthen the capacity of communities to monitor areas where breeding commonly occurs, detect locust populations, and respond to potential infestations through environmentally safe and effective methods. In this regard, USAID supports research and development of naturally occurring, botanical pest control agents made from the neem tree or certain types of fungus. These kinds of pesticides offer many benefits, including how they specifically target locusts and their close relatives, safety for humans, environmental friendliness, and relatively longer-lasting effect.

USAID also supports scientists in locust-affected countries by sponsoring their efforts to measure the extent of locust infestation and damage and by providing them with technical expertise on locust control. In addition, USAID helps regional and national authorities coordinate and share information on monitoring, assessment, and preventive interventions. These efforts help improve everyone’s ability to prevent and respond to locust threats more successfully.

Increasingly, locust sightings called in from farmers and herdsman are being used as part of the overall efforts in locust surveillance, monitoring, and reporting. Once received, the information is validated by locust control staff through field visits or other means and then used to determine whether intervention is necessary. Since locust swarms can destroy so much so quickly, the timing is critical. With more and reliable data, locust control organizations can take rapid action to treat infested areas before a disaster occurs.

Through its strong ties with scientists in locust-affected countries, as well as international and regional organizations that manage pest outbreaks, USAID and its partners work to minimize and effectively respond to the threat locusts and other pests pose to rural communities and economies.



Locusts like the ones pictured above can destroy crops and pasture land once they form a swarm. Photo by Sonya Green, USAID.



A locust swarm feeds on acacia trees in Mali. Photo by Yene Belayneh, USAID.