

China facing food shortage after months of flooding, infestations

Xi's description of food waste as 'shocking and distressing' could portend looming food shortage.



Flooding of Yellow River in Shangluo, Shaanxi Province on August 6. (Weibo photo)

TAIPEI (Taiwan News) — Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping's call for an end to food waste is a sign that the communist country is facing a shortage of grains and pork after months of flooding, insect infestations, the African swine fever (ASF), and the impact of the Wuhan coronavirus (COVID-19).

According to China's state-run media mouthpiece Xinhua, Xi called for an end to food waste, describing the problem as "shocking and distressing." In a quote of Xi posted by state-owned TV channel CGTN, he does not directly acknowledge a shortfall in food production but describes the coronavirus outbreak as a warning sign: "Though China has reaped a bumper grain harvest for years, it is still necessary to have the awareness of a food security crisis. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic this year has sounded the alarm for us."

This is the second time that Xi has given instructions on China's grains within a month, raising eyebrows among China watchers as a sign of a possible food crisis. On July 22, Xi toured cornfields in Jilin Province and cryptically said: "The more risks and challenges we face, the more we need to stabilize agriculture and ensure the safety of grain and major non-staple foods," reported Beijing Review.

On Wednesday (Aug. 12), the National Food and Strategic Reserves Administration announced that its purchases of wheat had dropped by nearly 10 million tons from the previous year. According to the government agency, as of Aug. 5, its purchases of wheat reached 42.86 million tons, a year-on-year drop of 9.38 million tons.

Its purchases of rapeseed reached 706,000 tons, a drop of 51,000 tons over the same period last year. Despite the massive floods of rice fields, purchases of rice reached 2.64 million tons, a year-on-year increase of 126,000 tons.

Meanwhile, food prices in China climbed by about 10 percent in July over the same period last year, while pork prices skyrocketed by 86 percent, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. The latter can be attributed to the loss of 180 million pigs, or 40 percent of the national herd, to ASF last year and reports of fresh outbreaks this year following the floods.

The flooding, which started in early June, is continuing in the Yangtze River, Huai River, and Yellow River basins, which are all important grain-producing regions. A total of 27 Chinese provinces have been hit by flooding so far this year, inflicting over 144.4 billion Chinese yuan in property damages.

Another serious problem that threatens China's food supply is insect infestations. The fall armyworm (FAW), which feasts on corn, has been detected in all but five of China's provinces, pushing corn prices to five-year highs, despite the release of 1.4 billion bushels of corn from the country's reserves, reported Forbes.

Another major threat to China's crops are hordes of locusts which have munched their way across Asia. On July 31, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs ordered the spraying of pesticide and deployment of drones to fight off the crop-chomping insects, which it reported had damaged about 90 square kilometers of cropland over the past month in regions of Yunnan Province that border Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam.

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