

## UB Post

Dzud may affect up to 150,000 herders

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The UNFAO is concerned about the number of livestock that will die in the looming dzud. The UNFAO has also described it as a "livelihood and poverty crisis".

Around 150,000 herders in the northern belt of Mongolia are at risk of losing their animals and livelihoods this winter as officials prepare to scale the dzud risk up to an emergency.

As temperatures plummeted to below -40 degrees Celsius in northern Mongolia and -56 in the

West in recent weeks, the national State Emergency Commission dispatched authorities and aid groups to conduct risk assessments across the country.

A total of 110 soums in 13 provinces were identified as "at risk". The assessments found 153,000 herders lived in the affected areas and around 16,000 households with seven million livestock must move to new pastures immediately.

Unlike the last dzud, this one is expected to impact northern and eastern Mongolia. The most vulnerable are the 2,500 pregnant women, 26,000 children and 8,000 elderly people living in winter pastures.

A dzud is an extreme weather phenomenon unique to Mongolia that occurs when a large number of livestock, mostly cows, sheep and goats, die from starvation or cold. It usually occurs after a dry summer combines with heavy snowstorms creating an ice crust that makes it difficult for animals to dig through to reach grass.



During dzuds, heavy snowstorms create an ice crust that makes it difficult for animals to dig through to reach grass. Over one million livestock died in last winter's dzud.

This year, the dry summer in the northeast and late autumn rains means the dzud risk is high. Heavy snowfall from October has refrozen after more heavy snow in November.

Last week on a visit to Khentii and Dornod, risk assessors from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UNFAO) found many

herder households were already suffering from the dzud.

"A dzud is usually officially declared once a certain number of animals have died, which is likely to be around March next year," said UNFAO deputy representative in Mongolia, Kevin Gallagher.

"But if we look at livelihood impact, the dzud is already here. People are already facing hardship."

A third of Mongolia's population relies directly on livestock as their primary source of food and income. This means that without their animals, they will plunge into poverty.

Herders' lives depend almost entirely upon their animals: for milk, cheese and meat, dung for heating, and fur for clothing and to sell to cover their children's schooling.

On the UNFAO's visit, they met Buryat Mongolians who are regarded as leaders in herding practices and technology. The Buryats are struggling to recover after a large steppe fire destroyed pastures earlier this year, which was later followed by a drought. This meant pastures were inadequate for animals to graze on.

"The Buryat people have never struggled before, they've been able to sustain the harsh dzuds, but this year they are struggling because vast territory was affected by fire and destroyed the pastures," said UNFAO Mongolia Programme officer, S.Jigjdpurev.

In settlements like Dornod and Khentii, 90 percent of herders have bank loans that they are struggling to repay, according to UNFAO.

"This number (of bank loans) is quite unprecedented," Dr. S.Jigjdpurev said.

Dzuds usually occur in five-yearly cycles and last for two winters. Mongolia is still reeling from the 2015-2016 dzud which killed 1.2 million livestock and left tens of thousands of herders in poverty. The 2010 dzud was much more deadly, killing eight million animals and costing the government millions in aid response.

UNFAO rejected claims that herders were unfairly burdening taxpayers by not doing enough to protect themselves from the financial and social impact of dzuds.

Dr. Gallagher said the failing domestic and international market and the overpopulation of animals were to blame.

"The herders are doing the right thing; they are doing what they can. This is market driven and outside of their control," Dr. Gallagher said.

"They can sell cashmere and wool but they can't sell meat because the abattoirs are either closed down or broke," he said. "No-one's buying their animals."

Some herders are selling meat to the markets in Ulaanbaatar but others don't have the transportation or cash available to organize the sale, he said.

While experts cannot predict how bad the looming dzud will be, they are concerned about the levels of reserve fodder supply and predictions that snowfall will increase more than usual and the incoming La Nina weather cycle.

According to the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), current winter preparation status for livestock is 82.8 percent at the national level, but hay and fodder stockpiles at the local district level are only at 50 percent of what is required.

The government and herders have been stockpiling fodder since summer. Dr. Gallagher said individual herders could do better at improving their fodder supplies.

"This year, one of the problems uncovered on the visit to Dornod and Khentii is that the herders were harvesting grass and then it rained and spoiled the grass, which became mouldy. So yes, herders can do better at collecting fodder supply," he said.



On a recent visit to affected aimags in Khentii and Dornod, the UNFAO discovered mouldy fodder. Dr Gallagher from the UNFAO said some herders need to improve their fodder collection practices.

Some herders, many of them elderly, only have a flock of four animals while other well-off herders have up to 1000 animals, he said.

The overpopulation of animals is a problematic issue for Mongolia. It not only leads to pasture degradation and overgrazing, but also raises

questions about whether herders will be able to continue to sustain their livelihoods if markets change and if more people move from regional centers to Ulaanbaatar.

"The dynamics are beyond the herders; something else has to change," he said.

UNFAO's next step is funding market forces that will allow herders to downsize their herds. While the government has approved 1.1 billion MNT (approximately 445,000 USD) in funding for emergency preparations for this year's dzud, the Deputy Prime Minister U.Khurelsukh convened a special meeting last week calling on international aid support.

Even though the government's preparedness for dzuds improved in recent years, capacity is expected to be much lower this year due to cost blowouts from the 2016 election, the economic downturn and the recovery of the last dzud only six months ago.

It is NGOs like Save the Children, the UN, Red Cross and other agencies that step in to fill the gap by delivering vital humanitarian aid.

In the 2015-2016 dzud, Save the Children Mongolia spent 1.1 million USD to assist 32,121 people affected by the dzud. The charity distributed fodder and cash grants to vulnerable



families and helped fund hospital outreach programs in hard-to-reach communities.

Save the Children Mongolia are preparing to deliver aid to herder families affected by the dzud.

The organization's Humanitarian Program manager E.Telmen warned that without aid this year, families would go without enough food, and many may be forced to cut costs on medical care and warm clothing.

"These households rely solely on animal fur for warmth, animal's

milk to stay nourished, and income from the herd to pay school fees and provide health care for their children," E.Telmen said.

E.Telmen explained that the social impacts of dzuds are wide-ranging; from poverty and loss of livelihoods, to children missing school as they help their families tend to the herd, as well as a loss of identity from herders who lose their nomadic roots.

"Kids can also be stuck in the dormitories for long periods of time without contact with the parents, especially when parents are in their winter camps with no phone access."

But one of the biggest impacts of dzuds in recent years has been the mass migration of herders, who often have no skills to find employment, to Ulaanbaatar and regional centers.

UNFAO says this year's dzud will be no different with many herders likely to be pushed out of herding, leaving them with little option but to migrate to the city.

"As herders begin to face the deadly winter months, many will also be worrying if they can find new ways to survive in the city," Dr. S.Jigjidpurev said.