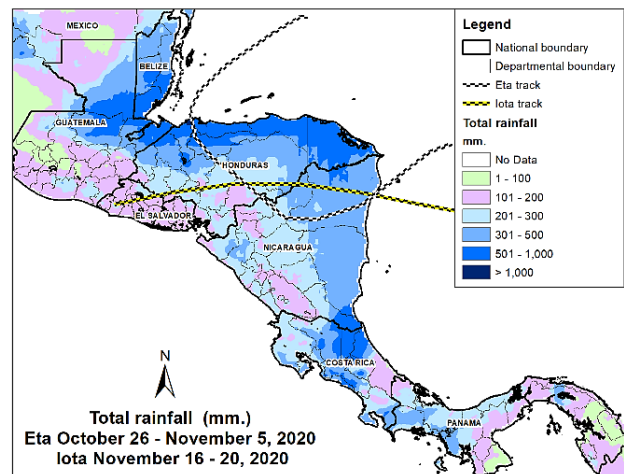


Hurricanes Eta and Iota will elevate food assistance needs in Central America through mid-2021

In November 2020, Central America was hit by two Category 4 hurricanes, Eta and Iota, within two weeks, in a context where poor and very poor households' income sources were already diminished due to COVID-19 and multiple years of poor rainfall in some areas. The storms brought up to 1,000 mm of rain in the worst affected areas, including northern and eastern Guatemala, northeastern Nicaragua, and northern Honduras, and up to 200 mm in eastern and western El Salvador. Overall, the hurricanes directly affected more than 6 million people, causing 235 deaths, displacing over 590,000 people, and isolating thousands of people. The storms also caused extensive damage to crops and farmland, livestock and fishing assets, and infrastructure, which will result in the reduction of critical food and income sources in both the short and medium term. Furthermore, many roads and bridges were either destroyed or temporarily made inaccessible, altering the food commodity supply flow and driving market functioning to below normal levels. Although local governments and humanitarian actors are responding with assistance, the need is expected to surpass the current capacity to respond.

Figure 1. Total rainfall during Eta (October 26 – November 5) and Iota (November 16-20) in millimeters



Source: FEWS NET

While damages from the second hurricane, Iota, are still being evaluated, FEWS NET estimates at least 3.5 million people are currently in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) throughout Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and a scale-up in food assistance is urgently required to meet these needs. Since the hurricanes hit the region at a time of year when poor and very poor households typically earn most of their annual income, and these income-earning opportunities have been undermined, atypically high needs are expected to persist through the 2021 lean season. Needs are likely to peak at over 4.0 million people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) in August 2021.

The hurricanes made landfall in Central America during the peak of the agricultural labor season, which occurs between October and February, and during the *postrera* harvest, which occurs in November. Over 200,000 hectares of staple food and cash crops were damaged in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, including beans, bananas, cassava, cacao, coffee, fruits, vegetables, cardamom, oil palm, sugar cane, and fodder. In addition, road infrastructure was damaged. As a result, due to both decreased labor demand and increased constraints to transportation, local and seasonal migrant households will suffer an overall decline in household income. In addition, according to the regional ministries of agriculture, much of the *postrera* bean production, which is highly susceptible to moisture damage, has been lost. The *postrera* harvest typically provides bean stocks for 3 to 4 months for poor households and offers some income from crop sales and local harvesting labor, particularly in the areas of northern and eastern Guatemala, northeastern Nicaragua, northern Honduras and western and eastern El Salvador.

Furthermore, livestock losses are reported in the Petén, Alta Verapaz, Quiché, Huehuetenango and Izabal departments in Guatemala; Cortés, Yoro, Atlántida and Santa Bárbara departments in Honduras; and the Northern Autonomous Atlantic Region, Matagalpa, and Chontales departments in Nicaragua, where livestock comprise an important source of income for some very poor and poor households. Along the Caribbean coasts of the three countries, many households are also expected to lose access to fishing, with the destruction of fishing equipment, such as nets and boats. Fish sales and fish products are a significant source of income and food for very poor households in these areas.

Below-average production and damaged infrastructure, such as collapsed roads and bridges, are disrupting trade flows, which will result in higher prices and subsequently reduce food access for many poorer households. According to government

sources in Guatemala, the hurricanes completely destroyed over 120 bridges and damaged over 500 roads across the country. Alongside speculation and hoarding of goods, higher transportation costs are expected to lead to sustained price increases, particularly for beans. Some markets are also likely to function at reduced levels in the medium term, affecting household food access in the affected areas.

In addition to the likely increase in acute food insecurity in hurricane-affected areas, there is heightened concern for negative health outcomes due to damaged water infrastructure and sewage systems. Furthermore, there is the potential for an increase in COVID-19 cases due to overcrowding in shelters and lack of access to clean water and proper sanitary measures. This does not apply to El Salvador, where the majority of those displaced have since been able to return to their homes.

Due to the above impacts of the hurricanes on household food and income sources, coupled with previous food insecurity drivers, FEWS NET estimates that over 3.5 million people are currently facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes. The population in need is located in parts of rural northeast Nicaragua, the Caribbean basin of Honduras, northern and eastern Guatemala, and western and eastern El Salvador, in addition to the Central American Dry Corridor. Humanitarian organizations have increased their efforts to address the immediate needs of populations located in shelters and households directly affected by the hurricanes. However, these efforts are unlikely to meet the medium- to longer-term needs of households given that the region had already been negatively affected by several consecutive years of poor rainfall and the COVID-19 pandemic, which have driven high needs in 2020, especially in the Dry Corridor. For small-scale farmers who partially or completely lost their crops due to the hurricanes, and for other poor households who lost productive assets and/or are unable to engage in agricultural labor, access to food and income will remain limited until the *primera* harvest in September 2021. An early onset of the lean season is projected in February, with atypically high food assistance needs likely to persist into the peak of the lean season in August 2021. Over 4.0 million will face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes.