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# Wheat disease threatens global crops

By Charlotte Eyre

14-Mar-2008 - **A new strain of a major fungal disease in wheat is now wiping out crops across Africa and Asia, sparking fears that manufacturers will be forced to pay even more for the vital commodity.**

Scientists, including some from the [John Innes Centre](#) (JIC) in the UK and the University of the Free State in South Africa, are currently battling against the Ug99 strain of [stem rust](#), which first originated in East Africa.

In the past, stem rust was generally controlled in the region by using wheat specifically cultivated to be resistant to the disease; however, the new strain is "particularly vigilant", JIC scientist Lesley Boyd told [BakeryAndSnacks.com](#).

*"With the ability to spread thousands of miles and the potential to wipe out 40 to 70 per cent of wheat yields, an outbreak has already cause a painful spike in wheat prices in the region".*

*Ug99 has now destroyed 80 to 90 per cent of wheat strains that are resistant to stem rust, and is certain to spread to other parts of the world.*

*The disease spreads through spores in the wind, Boyd explained, and so has already spread to Pakistan and the Yemen. It is now only "a matter of time" before it spreads to warmer wheat-growing climates such as China, India, Australia and the Ukraine.*

Scientists will now look at the genetic make up of different wheat varieties to try and identify genetic resistance to the disease. One such variety that may be a possible candidate is Cappelle Desprez, an old European variety, scientists said.

However, Boyd warned that a solution is unlikely to surface any time soon, as it takes five years to breed a resistant strain.

Bakery firms across the globe are already suffering because of the rocketing cost of wheat, blamed on a variety of reasons including increased demand from emerging markets and biofuels.

Last week, the American Bakers Association (ABA) lobbied the new US Agriculture Secretary, Ed Schafer, along with senior White House officials, to ask for support from the lawmakers.

The visit was prompted by what the ABA called "critically low reserves" of wheat in the country.

Wheat on the Chicago Board of Trade today rose to trade above \$13 a bushel for the first time since Feb. 27 when the price reached a record. The price gained 16 percent in the past three days, the biggest such gain in two weeks.

And in the UK, the chief executive of [Premier](#) Foods called for the government to plant more wheat fields to help restore the balance between supply and demand.

In an interview with *The Financial Times*, Robert Schofield said that wheat prices were unlikely to fall: "any time soon", as "demand for wheat was greater than supply."

He advocated that "more land needs to be put under the plough so the supply side is balanced out against the demand."

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