
Interview: Julia Taft

State Dept. in crisis management approach to war on locust plague

Julia Taft, director of the U.S. State Department's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, was interviewed Aug. 22 by Marjorie Mazel Hecht, managing editor of Fusion magazine.

Hecht: The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization has known the dimensions of the problem since at least May, possibly even March, when they were predicting a locust plague, and yet a war mobilization did not take place. Can you comment on this delay, and do you think the war against the locusts can still be won?

Taft: Let me comment on the delay. One has to keep in mind that this is a very dynamic situation, changing every single day. What was true in May was not true in June. We have one particular example in Chad, for instance, where there was opportunity to do field surveillance and we received reports that there was no major problem in Chad, that everything was under control.

The next week, when observers went out, they came back to the same areas and there they [the locusts] were all over, in every prefecture. It's not as though the location and timing is always predictable. What I'm sure you know is that this is the first time in 60 years where there has been a simultaneous outbreak of all four locusts and the Senegalese grasshopper.

One can't expect the national pest-control organizations to be fully capable of doing a massive intervention if they have never been challenged to do that in their lifetime. We have to look at this from what the host country capability is and what the FAO has been doing in its long-term efforts at institution building. There are major weaknesses in the institutions in some countries, but in others they have done a splendid job. But even in those countries that are well organized and well prepared, there are now emerging major crises.

Hecht: What are these countries?

Taft: Niger and Burkina Faso are two examples of countries that have had a very good protection and control organization. Niger still is all right, but we are seeing major strains in the Burkina Faso organization. The same is true in the regional locust control organizations: the Red Locust Control

Organization out of Zambia and the Desert Locust Control Organization out of Nairobi. The regional organizations are well staffed, with competent entomologists. However, the vehicle repair and the airlift repair require major investments and they have not been funded to the levels that they need throughout the years, to really be able to be totally operational. But they're basically fairly sound. The West African regional organizations have not been able to maintain much efficiency. I probably shouldn't say this, but I think they are basically very weak institutions. They really have to address from the development standpoint what one does to reinstitute regional capacity.

The role of the FAO, I think, has been very good. Considering the fact that we are dealing with all of the African countries affected so far, they are trying very hard to get ahead of this problem.

We have not lost the war; in fact, the war has not even started. The war is going to start in September and October. The dates that we are looking at is that spraying can start by Sept. 1, in Chad, in Mali, in Mauritania, and in Senegal, which are the principal countries that we are concerned about right now. Our target date for the international response is Sept. 1.

Now in preparation for this, the FAO has established its emergency coordinating and logistics unit with extraordinary authority to do procurement and response. They've only been in existence for a couple of weeks, but they are staffing up and they have computerized their information processing, and I think they are really ready to respond.

Hecht: Where is the coordinating unit located?

Taft: In Rome. Now, in addition to that, just this week I went to Rome for an international donors conference, to meet with my counterparts and with other countries' representatives to the FAO to discuss what our collective concerns are and to discuss what our collective response would be. Many of us were operating with mixed information about the magnitude of the problem. It is very hard to get any consensus as to how many grasshoppers and locusts exist per hectare in any of these countries, because we are talking about massive

amounts of land, and different kinds of collection people, different times. One group going one day may not see the grasshoppers seen at some other times because the grasshoppers have moved. It is very hard to get a handle on this. For this reason, however, we in Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance have sent out three assessment teams, one in Chad, one in Mali-Mauritania, and one in Senegal. We are planning to send another one on Aug. 30 to Zaire. Basically, these teams are going out to try to collate all of the available information, try to resolve any of the differences in the numbers, and actually take site trips out to do the counting along with the FAO people, the host country people, and other donors so that we can all start talking the same numbers.

Hecht: Do you think that you have a shot at winning this war against the locusts?

Taft: I think that it's possible the host countries and donors can contain it. It's going to be very expensive. We were just talking with our team in Senegal about how much it is going to cost to get our self-contained approach out there, and we are talking millions of dollars—\$4 million to spray two large-ly infested areas, about 360,000 hectares.

It is well worth the investment if in fact it saves the food crop, and you don't have to send in relief food or have the infestation grow in other places. . . .

We came away from that meeting [in Rome] with a commitment that the United States will give \$1.25 million toward the total program of about \$3 million, with other donors coming up with the remaining money. We clarified that yesterday, and today we are already looking at a much larger budget for additional intervention.

It's not good planning; it's just that the magnitude of the problem is growing on every single front. After the spraying, which we anticipate to take place in all of these countries from Sept. 1 to about the 21, we are going to get some monitors out there to find out how many critters—carcasses—there are, to find out whether the spraying was effective. We've really got to keep on monitoring. It's not just a one-shot deal [of spraying]. It's now, again in November, and in many of these countries, it's again a couple of times next spring.

Hecht: I have tried to plot the areas of locust and grasshopper infestation on a map of Africa, and it's almost all covered—

Taft: I have a map and I have so many locust finds I can hardly see the continent. However, one has to look within each country. For instance, in Chad, you have sightings in every prefecture, but you have concentrations congregating (not swarming) around Lake Chad. So in terms of a priority strike, you go for the Lake Chad area. . . .

Hecht: Are you considering the U.S. Air Force spraying planes?

Taft: We've got information about them, but I don't think we are going to use them yet. They only have two planes; they are using a different type of aircraft than commercial aircraft. This would be if we work it out with the host countries. . . .

We are only basically here to help as an international donor; it is basically the responsibility of the host country. We are trying to coordinate through the assistance of the FAO. Part of our assistance is directly to FAO to do procurement, and direct purchase of things like Fenitrothion, but in addition to that we're working bilaterally, too.

Where can we be most effective? Sometimes it is through FAO; sometimes it's directly with the host country, and so our approach is going to be a combination of the two. But we are very much committed to keeping FAO out in the forefront, and working very closely with the other donors. The European Community, the French are the most involved at this point, the Norwegians. We hope to see additional commitments from Canada and Great Britain. . . .

Hecht: What would you have done differently, if there were no constraints on your program?

Taft: I don't think that I would have done anything differently, as a matter of fact. We just came through this incredible drought and famine experience in Africa. And all of the offices in the United States and other donor countries have gone through very stiff self-examinations on what they did and what they could have done better; what kind of information they had, and how they would do it if they had to do it again. Fortunately, those studies are done. Every time we start thinking about locusts, we ask what are the things that we didn't do well last time. One was, we weren't working closely with Congress. And so we've gone up to Congress and said what the situation is at the very beginning. . . .

Hecht: You mentioned that it would cost about \$4 million in Senegal alone. What is the total budget?

Taft: The FAO has a proposed budget for a best-case scenario of about \$3.3 million. That was prepared on Monday [Aug. 18], and we are going to have to revise it, because it is not a best-case situation in some countries, even though it will be an adequate response in others. But at least all the people are talking together and we are all looking at the numbers and are trying to come up with a complementary approach, regardless of the fact that these things are changing on a daily basis.

Hecht: This \$3.3 million is just for the initial spraying through Sept. 21?

Taft: That is correct.

Hecht: Can you tell me what your own background is?

Taft: I'm a crisis manager, and for the past 10 years I've worked on refugee responses internationally and locally.