



**Extension**

# Pest e-alerts



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## **Alfalfa Insect Update – 11 May 2020**

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By now, weather permitting, most alfalfa growers have harvested their first cutting of the season. However, scouts and growers much remain vigilant in field scouting. Now is the time-variegated cutworm, *Peridroma saucia* (Hubner), can make an appearance. Pest e-Alert reports back in February and March (Vol. 19, No 4 & 7) from Dr. Tom Royer and I addressed the threat to wheat, canola and alfalfa from army cutworm. While the threat of army cutworm has passed, potential variegated cutworm activity is still a possibility.

I received a report from extension educator Dana Bay, Ellis County, regarding a grower having problems with this pest in western Oklahoma. Pictures sent indicate feeding damage that occurred under the windrow before harvest (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Variegated Cutworm damage under windrows.

During April, adult moths of the variegated cutworm emerge from overwintering pupae and lay eggs in alfalfa fields. Typically, larvae hatch and feed on foliage while growing to a length of 1-2" before the first harvest is taken. However, feeding by small larvae in the first crop is often not noticeable. The most serious damage by this species typically occurs in early May on new growth for the second crop. Like the army cutworm, the variegated cutworm feeds at night and seeks shelter by tunneling into soil or gathering beneath windrows during daylight hours. Consequently, damage will be most severe beneath windrows where the cutworms have found shelter. There is frequently a "ribbon-like" appearance of alternating heavy damage (under windrows) and light damage (between windrows) in infested fields after baling as shown in figure 1. In the most severe infestations, the cutworms may delay growth of the second crop by 2-3 weeks or more.



Figure 2. Variegated Cutworm. (Photo Courtesy: Frank Peairs, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org)

**Sampling and Control.** Detection of cutworms and assessment of population densities is often difficult because of their nocturnal feeding habits. Whenever alfalfa seems slow to "green-up" during March (army cutworm) or after first harvest (variegated cutworm) (Figure 2.), fields should be checked for the presence of cutworms. Sampling requires sifting through plant debris and the upper 1-2 inches of soil around plants. A minimum of ten, 1-sq. ft. areas should be sampled in each 10-20 acre field area. When numbers of small larvae (up to ½ inch long) exceed an average of 3/sq. ft., an insecticide should be applied. If large larvae (>½ inch) are present, spraying is recommended when numbers exceed 2/sq. ft. Control of cutworms with insecticides may be difficult. It is important that applications be made in late afternoon or evening, near the time when larvae begin to feed, using high spray volumes of at least 10 gal/acre-ground or 2-4 gal/acre-aerial to insure thorough coverage. Additional information on control of cutworms can be found in [OSU Extension Factsheet No. 7150](#)

## **Disease and Insect Diagnostic Laboratory**

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