Pest e-alerts

Entomology and Plant Pathology, Oklahoma State University
127 Noble Research Center, Stillwater, OK 74078
405.744.5527

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Army Cutworms Reported in Some Wheat and Alfalfa Fields.

Tom A. Royer, Extension Entomologist and IPM Coordinator
Kelly Seuhs, Associate Extension Specialist
Department of Entomology & Plant Pathology
Oklahoma State University - 127 Noble Research Center
405-744-9958

Several people, including Lanie Hale, Rob Anderson, and Mike Rosen of Wheeler Brothers and Area Extension Agronomist Heath Sanders have reported possible army cutworm activity. These reports are based on direct observations and noticeable crow and blackbird “gatherings” in some wheat and alfalfa fields in areas of western Oklahoma. Infestation levels were at the “caution” stage at this time and caterpillars measured ¼ to ½ inches.

Army cutworms tolerate cold and feed throughout the winter months. Adult army cutworm moths migrate to Oklahoma each fall (August through October) from their grounds in the Rocky Mountains. They seek bare or sparsely vegetated fields (like a newly prepared field ready for wheat planting, or a field that was "dusted in" and had not yet or just emerged, or a newly planted alfalfa stand). The eggs hatch soon after deposition. A producer might see different sizes of larvae in a field due to the long migration period. Army cutworms feed throughout the winter and molt seven times before they turn into pupae in the soil. Most larvae will have pupated by mid-late March. Adult moths begin emerging in April to fly back to the Rocky Mountains to spend the summer.

Army cutworms can severely damage wheat, canola, and newly planted stands of alfalfa if not controlled. Cutworm damage often goes unnoticed through much of the winter because the caterpillars grow slowly and don't get big enough to cause noticeable damage until temperatures warm in the spring. One early indication cutworm presence in a field is the gathering of blackbirds and or crows that seem to be actively feeding. It becomes important to check the fields for cutworms before they cause damage and stand loss.

Figure 1: Wheat stand loss from army cutworm

Figure 2: Cutworm damage to canola

Sample a field by stirring or digging the soil to a depth of two inches at five or more locations. The cutworms will be "greenish grey", and will probably curl up into a tight "C" when disturbed.

It is better to control army cutworms when they are small (½ inch long or less). Army cutworms are very susceptible to pyrethroid insecticides. At this time of year, an insecticide application can be combined with a late winter top-dress nitrogen application. Suggested treatment thresholds for army cutworms in wheat are 2-3 worms per row foot when conditions are dry and 4-5 per row foot if moisture is adequate. Current recommendations for army cutworm control in small grains are listed in CR-7194, *Management of Insect and Mite Pests in Small Grains*.

The suggested treatment threshold for cutworms in canola is 1-2 per row-foot. Current recommendations for control of army cutworms in canola are listed in CR-7667, *Management of Insect and Mite Pests in Canola.*

In newly seeded alfalfa, the threshold is 1-2 larvae per square foot. In established alfalfa fields, the threshold is 2-4 larvae per square foot and should be adjusted based on the size of the caterpillars (2-3 per square foot if caterpillars are more than ½ inches, 3-4 per square foot if less than ½ inches). Current recommendations for control of army cutworms in alfalfa are listed in CR-7150, *Alfalfa Forage Insect Control.*

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