Hardin County Extension News Release
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Trapping Armyworm and Black Cutworm

Hardin County – The Hardin County OSU Extension office is trapping armyworm and black cutworm in the county this year as a way of determining the level of activity in the area. This trapping is being done in the spring months in addition to the western bean cutworm traps that are set around the county in the summer. The University of Kentucky has reported high true armyworm moth counts in the past few weeks. The mild winter likely contributed to the higher and earlier catches this year. These moths migrate northward, so if our southern neighbor is reporting high catches, these moths are also very likely flying into Ohio. After migrating and establishing, armyworms begin to lay eggs in grasses, including wheat fields and cover crop fields (that may have corn planted soon). Larvae feed for about 3 weeks before pupating. Right now, it is still too early to take any management action—eggs probably have not even been laid, let alone hatched. However, the high trap counts so far suggest that armyworms are a pest to watch out for later in the growing season.

True armyworm damage is observed most frequently in no-till fields that were sod the previous year or had small-grain cover crops that were not burned down with herbicides early enough in spring. The first symptoms will be ragged feeding on the top leaves with wet, brown pellets (feces) in the area. The culprit usually can be found hiding well down in the whorl or at ground level under clumps of grass. Conventionally planted corn occasionally may be damaged by caterpillars that originate in a nearby small grain field, but poorly managed small grain cover crops appear to be a frequent source of caterpillars; when the cover crop is killed, armyworms will move to the corn. When armyworms are numerous, small corn plants may be completely eaten down to the midribs. On very rare occasions, larvae of the second generation may attack corn in late July and August. These caterpillars hide under stones and clods during the day, then feed on grasses and lower corn leaves at night. However, the type of damage is much different than that caused by the first generation. They seldom destroy any leaves above the ear.

It is suspected that black cutworms could be more plentiful this growing season as well due to the mild winter. Black cutworm females like to lay eggs in fields with heavy weed cover; weeds like chickweed
are especially favored by black cutworm. As these weeds are killed by tillage or herbicide, the larvae move to emerging corn. Unfortunately, there aren’t good “pre-control” options. Insecticidal seed treatments do not offer much protection, and tank-mixing an insecticide with early burn-down has limited efficacy if scouting has not been done to see if larvae are present. Instead, OSU Extension recommends rescue treatments that are very effective in controlling damage. If more than 3% of corn are showing damage, corn is in the V2-V6 stage, and larvae are less than 1 inch, treatment may be needed.

Black cutworms exhibit two types of feeding patterns depending upon the amount of moisture in the soil and size of plants. Where soil moisture is adequate and plants are small, the larvae hide in the soil during the day and move to the soil surface at night where they cut off plants just above the soil surface. This is typical damage for most cutworm species. One larva will cut off an average of five corn plants during its development. In situations of dry soil conditions, the larvae do not move to the surface to feed, but instead, they chew into the plant just below the soil surface. This causes the corn plants to wilt and usually die. Loss of plants in infested fields will vary from 10 to 80 percent. Seldom is a field completely destroyed, rather severe damage is usually confined to portions of the field.

Traps will be set around the county in three locations to check for true armyworm and black cutworm activity. These traps will be checked weekly and counts reported to OSU entomologists to make recommendations for management and control of these pests so they don’t become an economic problem in corn. If you are a farmer who is interested in placing traps near your field, you are asked to call the Hardin County Extension Office at 419-674-2297 or email badertscher.4@osu.edu so that placement of traps can be made.

*Photo caption: True armyworm and black cutworm traps are being set up around Hardin County by OSU Extension to monitor the level of activity of these pests.*