

Post Rock Extension District Column

Week of February 28 – March 4, 2022

By Sandra L. Wick

K-State Research and Extension-Post Rock District
Crop Production Agent

Be on the lookout for a trio of insects in wheat and alfalfa this spring!

Well, winter is definitely still with us, but spring will be here in about a month!!! You might want to put on your task list, to scout your wheat and alfalfa fields early this spring for some pesky culprits!!

A trio of pests could make early spring difficult for wheat and alfalfa growers in Kansas.

But until wheat begins to break its winter dormancy, Kansas State University crop entomologist Jeff Whitworth said there's not much that farmers can do about army cutworms, winter grain mites and the Hessian fly. "They're not going to cause a problem when the wheat or alfalfa is in dormancy," Whitworth said. "Once the crop starts to grow, that's when you need to get out and start looking."

Army cutworms caused big problems in Kansas wheat and alfalfa fields in 2018 and 2019. The insect carries a very important distinction from armyworms and fall armyworms, two pests that created headaches for many producers last fall. Whitworth stresses that the army cutworm will over-winter as a worm, so they're out there feeding on wheat and alfalfa anytime the temperature gets above 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

The crops are dormant now, but when it warms up and the crops break dormancy, that's when you'll notice the army cutworms feeding. If you had army cutworms last year, they're still going to be there in the spring. An indication of army cutworms in the field is if birds are hovering and looking for meals, there's a good chance the army cutworm is their target.

According to Whitworth, it won't be the fall armyworms; they don't come back into Kansas until mid-July. He points out that if you have feeding early on, it's army cutworms, and they are there as a result of the moth flying around last fall depositing eggs.

Winter grain mites are another pest that might be a problem. They often capitalize on dry conditions in wheat fields which we are experiencing now! As their name suggests, the little critters are most active in cold weather – typically 30-50 degrees, stresses Whitworth. Generally, if we have good growing conditions, the wheat has no problem out-growing a significant winter grain mite infestation. But if the wheat is struggling from a lack of moisture and you have winter grain mites sucking the juice out of each cell, that can really add to the stress of the wheat plant.

A good rain is the best protection for wheat and alfalfa from winter grain mites. Whitworth, with more than four decades of experience, says he rarely recommends treating for mites with insecticides because usually we get rain in some form or fashion.

The **Hessian Fly** is yet another culprit that rears its' ugly head!!! It is a dark-colored insect about one-eighth inch long -- prefers wheat as a winter home, but it is in the spring that its damage becomes most apparent. Females lay eggs in the fall and the larvae gradually build a protective capsule often referred to as a flaxseed. You will need to wait until the plants start breaking dormancy. Whitworth points out that if any place in the field seems to be going backwards -- as producers describe it, or it's not keeping up with the rest of the field -- then check that area to determine what the problem is

Don't hesitate to contact me at any of our Post Rock Extension District Offices in Beloit, Lincoln, Mankato, Osborne or Smith Center for assistance in identifying insect pests in your fields. There is also a weekly update on Kansas crops that is available in the KSU Extension Agronomy online newsletter. If you would like to get on this listserv, simply give me a call.

The KSU NW Extension Region along with our Post Rock District is hosting a series of agronomy webinars called "**Crop Talk**" that is scheduled ONLINE every Monday through March 14 at NOON to 1:00 p.m. To register for the webinars simply go to our website at www.postrock.ksu.edu. Hope you can join us!!!!

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Sandra may be contacted at swick@ksu.edu or by calling Smith Center, 282-6823, Beloit 738-3597, Lincoln 524-4432, Mankato, 378-3174, or Osborne 346-2521. Join us on Facebook at "Post Rock Extension". Our "Quick Friday Facts" are published every week on our website www.postrock.ksu.edu and my twitter account is @PRDcrops.