The last couple of weeks there have been several calls and questions about the caterpillar that has defoliated the tops of soybean plants in the area. This caterpillar is the silver spotted skipper. It is a unique looking caterpillar with a lime-green body and a maroon colored head with yellow spots around the eyes. Earlier this summer we saw many of the skipper butterflies in the area and this has lead to an unusual number of caterpillars in soybean fields. I have identified the skipper caterpillars in previous years in soybean fields, but never at levels we are seeing in 2011.

The big question is, “Should I treat my soybeans with an insecticide?” This is a good question because there have been very few documented reports of the silver spotted skipper causing economic damage to soybeans. For this reason there is very little information on documented economic thresholds for treatment of this caterpillar. The lateness of these infestations, maturity of your soybeans, amount of defoliation and growth stage of the caterpillar are all factors to consider before you treat a field. In researching this insect, I found reports from June, 2011 that there were also higher than normal numbers in parts of Michigan. Information from Ohio State University on soybean defoliators also mentioned that defoliation could occur from the silver spotted skipper. For all defoliators, they recommended treatment if defoliation was 25% or greater after pod-fill until soybean plant yellowing. The key to this is total plant defoliation, not just the top. They also mentioned that the pest should still be present in the field and active.

A week or two ago we did see a considerable amount of defoliation on the top part of the plant, in driving down the highway you could see the soybeans having a grayish cast on the top of the plants due to the top leaves being defoliated. When some of these soybean fields were evaluated, the silver spotted skipper caterpillars were absent or very few of them were present. Many of these adult caterpillars are beginning to pupate as well, so their defoliation of soybeans will come to an end. If soybeans are beginning to turn yellow the soybean plants will lose their leaves soon and treatment is not recommended.

I know a number of fields have already been treated and it may improve the soybean yields in these fields; but unless you have a large infestation of the silver spotted skipper caterpillars that are still active, your whole soybean plant is defoliated 25% or more, and soybean pods are filling, treatment may not be economically beneficial. If you decide to treat with an insecticide for any insect that is defoliating your soybeans, i.e. silver spotted skipper, bean leaf beetle or wooly bear caterpillars, be sure to check the pre-harvest interval so you do not have to delay harvest. People were caught on this issue a few years ago with fungicides on wheat, so be aware of post-harvest intervals on any chemical applied to soybeans. If you have questions, contact me at the Nemaha County Extension office at (402) 274-4755.

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