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CHECK FOR LEAFHOPPER DAMAGE

One thing that has changed with alfalfa production is that today, potato leafhoppers have the potential to cause economic injury to alfalfa every year and it is usually to second or third cutting. They do not overwinter in Nebraska, but are brought in on southerly winds. You often see increased numbers of them after storm fronts move through.

These small (1/8 inch long), bright green, wedge-shaped insects can cause severe damage to alfalfa by injecting a toxin into the plant as they feed. This feeding results in a distinctive yellow or purple triangle shape at the leaf tip. First year, spring-planted alfalfa fields are particularly attractive to and vulnerable to potato leafhoppers, as are fields planted last year. In older fields, these insects are usually a problem on second and third cuttings.

Near Swanton, I checked a three-year old alfalfa field where the second cutting was not growing so well and was yellow in certain areas of the field and appeared to be soil type related. I suspected leafhopper damage but the sweep net was empty and you did not see the typical leaf tip damage. Foliar samples proved to show sulfur deficiency. This is in the same area of the county we have seen sulfur deficiency in certain winter wheat fields the last several years.

Newly developed, resistant alfalfa varieties provide fairly good protection from potato leafhoppers; however, seedling alfalfa may still be damaged. All fields should still be scouted, as large numbers of leafhoppers can cause a problem, even in resistant-variety fields.

When we put up alfalfa for hay, leafhoppers will migrate out of the field to adjacent soybeans, field edges and trees. You do not see damage from them in these nearby borders and fields. Scout alfalfa regrowth after cutting and consider insecticide treatment if the field reaches suggested threshold levels.

Last year, between Wilber and Crete, a grower had a new Roundup Ready alfalfa field that had a lot of promise but leafhoppers really took their toll on the field late in the year. Scout newly seeded fields carefully because we tend to see more injury in these fields than established stands.

Treatment decisions are based on numbers captured by a sweep net as this is the only reliable method. I have substituted a cap also. Many of the suggested spray thresholds are a fraction of a leafhopper per plant.

There are many insecticides that are registered for control and all will provide good results when applied properly. If there are any bee hives nearby, work with those owners so that proper precautions can be taken. Commonly used insecticides include Mustang, Warrior, Baythroid, and Lorsban, or products with the same active ingredients.

For more information go to Cropwatch.unl.edu at <http://ow.ly/yJLUh>

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