K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

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The 'Aftermath' of a Fall Armyworm Invasion

Last week, I expressed hope our annual arrival of fall armyworms wouldn't cause many issues. I was wrong. Numbers in many fields have reached significant injury levels, even in stands with plenty of forage biomass available for feeding.

Feeding has just begun for some and since it could last another week or two, a treatment decision might have to be made. Others are on the back side of feeding with an idea of the extent of injury you're dealing with. Either way, it might be difficult to know 'what's next' in the aftermath of feeding. With so many variables involved, it's difficult to say, but there are a few things to consider.

For starters, what shape was the stand in before feeding? Were fertility levels good? Has it been producing well? When was it harvested and how was it recovering? A grass plant uses a combination of green tissue above ground and reserves from root systems below ground to regrow after harvest. If plants get large enough (four to five leaves), they can continue to replenish root energy reserves as they grow new leaves. That means stands that have recovered well can better tolerate removal of foliage from armyworm feeding than stands that only saw a small amount of regrowth before the armyworms moved through. If that root 'tank' isn't full, recovery may be slower and less consistent.

Second, be vigilant as the season continues. With the entire life cycle of the Fall Armyworm lasting around 30 days, we could see another generation (or two depending on where in the life cycle the Fall Armyworm is in your stand…) before they migrate south. With the potential for additional feeding this fall, keep scouting and be ready for the next round of decision making that comes with more feeding.

Last: look ahead. If the reason one stand suffered and another didn't has to do with fertility, or timing of harvest, or any other factor we might have control over, is there anything we can do to address potential problems next time around? Harvest timing this year may be one of those variables. Some stands had great regrowth after harvest. Those stands aren't immune to feeding but *may* have enough biomass to tolerate feeding. Later hayed stands have less biomass to start with, and feeding *could* cause them to stop growing for a time if feeding is heavy.

Two of the variables we *can't* control are weather and armyworm migration. Good growing conditions (temperature plus moisture) through the remainder of the growing season can help even severely injured stands recover prior to frost. More drought like conditions may hamper that recovery. With luck, the next moth flight will take feeding elsewhere but being prepared for another generation this fall equipped with a better knowledge of what to expect before, during, and after feeding is seldom a bad idea.