

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

Fall Armyworm Scouting

The combination of increasing Fall Armyworm moth trap numbers to our south and a delayed hay harvest getting back into full swing is one worth keeping an eye on. Many soon to be harvested fields will be covered in tender regrowth that could be attractive to the northward migrating moth, and while there's no guarantee they will become an issue, being prepared is never a bad thing. Timely scouting is one key to being prepared.

In short, the fall armyworm's life cycle lasts approximately a month depending on temperature and other factors. The larval feeding stage makes up about two weeks of that time, and while feeding only lasts a short time, the damage can be great, particularly as larvae reach the end of their feeding period (when they are also more difficult to control). Early on, however, their damage is minimal and their tendency to hide around the base of plants means they will be difficult to see from afar – or sometimes even when we walk stands.

One fall armyworm indicator sometimes mentioned is bird feeding in stands. Birds *will* feed on fall armyworm larvae, but they feed on other insects in fields as well and aren't the most reliable indicator. They also don't tend to flock to fields until larvae are larger and likely already doing significant damage (and potentially even too large to control). It *might* be an indicator – but there are better ones.

A better indicator is leaf windowpaning. Early larval feeding occurs on the underside of the leaf blade and often doesn't penetrate the upper leaf epidermis. Feeding instead leaves tiny, white 'windowpanes' in leaf blades or a fuzzy white appearance to leaf tips. When walking fields, if you note 25 to 30 percent of plants with windowpaning, fall armyworm larvae are likely at work. Look around the base of plants for small larvae and initiate daily scouting to monitor pressure. These small larvae are going to exponentially increase in size (and food requirement) in a very short time and timely management via insecticides, harvest, etc...will be key.

Early season scouting can be tough. It's almost impossible to predict where moths might congregate and it could take a couple of generations before numbers are high enough to readily notice them. The task list is long this time of year but consider making fall armyworm scouting at least a small priority. An ounce of scouting really can result in pounds of saved forage