

THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

WATCH OUT FOR THE ALFALFA SNOUT BEETLE IN 2010!

The alfalfa snout beetle (ASB) is the most damaging alfalfa insect pest and can completely destroy an alfalfa stand within a year or two. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture estimates that ASB can cause a 20 to 30% increase in feed costs in some cases, due to reductions in yield and quality - certainly something that no dairy farm (or any farm feeding alfalfa) can afford. ASB was identified as an alfalfa pest in the late 1920's when alfalfa was introduced as a forage crop in Oswego County (NY). ASB has since spread onto an estimated 500,000 acres of NY cropland. In the State of New York (alone), recent ASB infestations have been confirmed in many locations. While no evidence of ASB has been found [yet] at Miner Institute, the recent discovery of ASB in the area should get the attention of alfalfa growers. In fact, the existence of this insect should be watched for by any producer growing alfalfa as a precaution. The adult ASB can "hitch rides" on farm implements, beehives, and other equipment, making containment difficult. Since all ASB adults are females, it only takes one to start an infestation, since they lay between 300 and 1,000 eggs. The broad host-range of ASB (alfalfa, clover, wild carrot, dandelion) and the inability to manage them with insecticides makes control difficult. The real damage is caused by larvae. Adults are on the move in April and lay eggs in June. Larvae migrate to depths of one to two feet in the soil and feed on roots until they pupate the second year. Damage by ASB should not be confused with winter kill. The best time to look for ASB damage is generally in late October. This picture of alfalfa damage (below) was



taken in the third week of October just prior to a 4th cutting and was easily distinguishable from the unaffected portions of the field in the background. ASB is typically found in well drained soils where the seasonally-high water table

is deeper in the ground. Dr. Elson Shields at Cornell has shown that biocontrol of ASB may be possible by inoculating soils with entomopathogenic nematodes, which prey specifically on ASB and other soil insects. Nematodes are cultured, added to water, and applied with

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sprayers at a rate of 1 billion/acre for a cost of about \$200/acre. Shields recently demonstrated that nematodes persisted for seven years at one site, while ASB populations stayed at manageable levels compared to no treatment. Shields also works with Dr. Don Viands at Cornell on developing ASB-resistant alfalfa. The Shields' lab has screened hundreds of thousands of plants and Dr. Viands performs the selection and cross breeding. They believe that both alfalfa resistance and biocontrol will be required for effective ASB control.

So what's the bottom line? Vigilant scouting is important because you and your farm neighbors need to know if ASB is present, where it is, and how severe. If you noticed suspicious alfalfa damage this past fall, be on the lookout for ASB adults this spring. While biocontrol and alfalfa resistance continue to improve, problem fields can be managed with a shorter rotation (~2 yr) or can be seeded to grass.

(Edited from an article by Eric Young, The Miner Institute, January 2010. The article on planting alfalfa for optimum results will be continued in a future edition.)



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