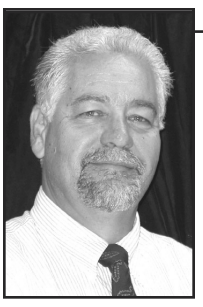
Fall Armyworm Moth Counts Continue To Climb



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Capture of fall armyworm (FAW) moths has increased for the second week in a row, and this week by a huge margin (Figure 1.). Not only has an unprecedented second distinct FAW flight begun, it has surpassed this year's previous peak in size. The August flight which reached 549 moths/trap-week for the trap-week ending Thur., Aug 16th, now stands at 675 moths/trap-week for trap-week ending Sept 13, 2012. Will it go higher? Only time will tell.

In addition to the numbers of FAW moths being captured, there is a second situation that gives me pause. This 2nd flight peak will be earlier in the season than we normally see, if one occurs. If the current numbers turn out to be the largest capture, then the peak will be approximately two weeks earlier than we would normally expect. Putting this in perspective, if we have an average frost date of Oct 22, this flight has approximately 5 1/2 weeks for the caterpillars to develop and feed on our crops as opposed to a more normal 3 weeks. If frost is late this interval could be even longer.

Remember, the graph above represents MOTH flight. Moths are not the damaging stage of this insect. These moths were captured because they were seeking female mates. Once mating and egg lay has occured, we will begin to see very small FAW caterpillars. This is the beginning of the damaging stage. This will likely take a week, perhaps two, depending on temperatures. Of course, further south and west (toward the upper Mississippi River bottoms) caterpillars will appear sooner. Further north and east (in the western 1/3rd of KY), caterpillars will take longer to appear. Fortunately, the traps in Lexington have just this week captured FAW for the 1st time this year; and the numbers are small. I doubt that there is any unusual risk in central and eastern portions of our field crop/pasture-hay production area.

Remember, as well, that these trap counts will NOT predict what will happen in an individual field. There is really no easy way to detect the presence of this pest. One must go to the field and look for their presence/activity. I would start by sweeping in grasses that have received enough rainfall to start re-growth. This will be a preferred egg laying location. FAW will lay eggs in soybeans, but they are not the preferred host. If this generation acts like the last, most soybean infestations will start with worms moving from grass waterways, roadsides & pasture/hay fields.

Crops primarily at risk will be newly planted wheat, pasture / hay production and very late maturing soybeans.

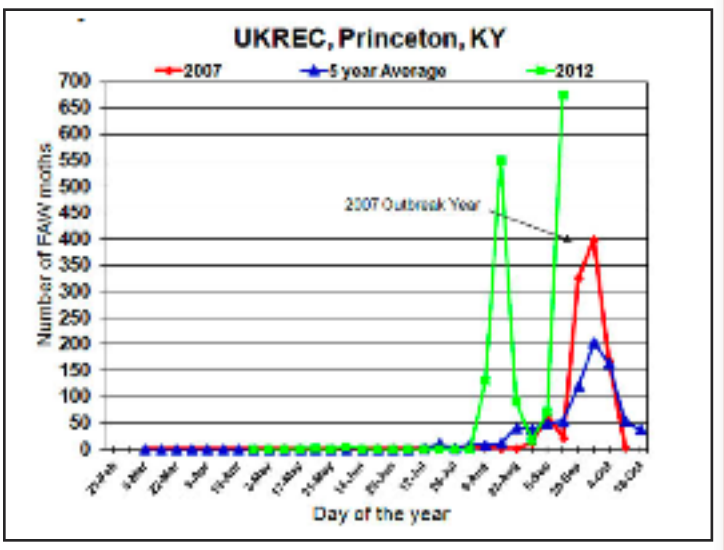

Figure 1. Fall Armyworm Moth Flights at Princeton, KY during 2012.

There is really only one thing that can bring this cycle to a halt…cold weather. FAW is a tropical insect that cannot overwinter in KY. In fact, under historic conditions, FAW cannot overwinter outside the gulf coast areas. So, vigilance will be needed until a hard frost stops their northward migration. Certainly, this is not the year for early planting of wheat. Δ

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