

How Much Control Do We Really Have?



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I'm writing this column today after a potentially major life-changing event. Fact is, I'm ecstatic that I can write this column. Monday evening (June 22, 2009), I was traveling on Interstate 64 just east of St. Louis when I was struck head on by another driver who was traveling at a high rate the wrong way down the highway. My car was smashed beyond belief. I not only survived, but was virtually unhurt. Now that said, I am back to thinking about agriculture and how much control we have over nature.

When we look at the factors that control what the yield will be from a particular crop, it turns out that we probably have a lot less control than we think.

Look back at last year's corn and soybean crops in Illinois. The guides stated that we should've had a rather poor yield since we were so late planting these crops. Yet, the plots that I worked with at our research fields were the second-best yielding in the 100-year history of our research farm. What I'm getting at is that one should never give up hope. On the other hand, one should also not ever just assume that a pest will be causing problems based on nothing but the time of year.

Integrated Pest Management tells us that we should look first, identify what we find, determine its potential risk, and then act based upon that potential risk. However, IPM is not only controlling pest issues after they appear.

Practicing IPM involves looking at every aspect of the production process. Planning your crop-

ping season is where you begin. Knowledge of common problems that have previously occurred can enable you to alter little things like seed selection, site selection and a multitude of other small changes that can reduce your exposure to later problems. For example, if you know that your field has large titers of soybean cyst nematodes, perhaps it would be prudent to grow an alternate crop this year in that field, or to select from the VIPS website a resistant variety of seed that yields well in your general location.

Weed control is essential, especially before weeds get large and are more resistant to your herbicide of choice. Pest control should occur when economic thresholds are reached, not before and not on a calendar basis.

Farming is pretty much like a roulette table. Every spring, you place your bets and roll the little ball and hope that it lands on one of your bets. The smart farmer bets on what is usually the best combination each year and usually arrives at harvest time with a good harvest. Every now and then, farmers who only do things because that is how their parents did them, or for some other reason, and don't concern themselves with the conditions will come out well. More often than not, this approach is unsuccessful.

I walked away from my accident with few injuries because I prepared in advance by wearing my seat belt, drove a car with outstanding safety ratings, and stayed alert enough to get my speed down to reduce the impact – plus, I had a lot of luck. Take steps to prepare yourselves for farming and for life. Δ

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