

PHOTO CREDIT: DAVE MONTESE



# Truth in the numbers

By HOLLY SPANGLER

**C**ARL Bradley has one message following his collection of fungicide plot data in 2008.

“Disease control is the primary reason we should be spraying these products,” says Bradley, a University of Illinois Extension pathologist. “That’s where you’ll see a more consistent response.”

Bradley had plots in eight locations across Illinois in 2008 and tested similar plots in 2007. The results were consistent, showing that where disease was most prevalent, fungicide provided the biggest yield results. And disease pressure was higher in 2008, which made for a bigger response.

Purdue University’s Greg Shaner compiled results from 13 states and Ontario, Canada. In grouping the plots by disease severity, Shaner found when disease severity was 5% or higher, fungicides increased yield by at least 7.5 bushels per acre. At disease severity of less than 5%, yield increases averaged just 1.2 bushels. Figuring \$4 corn and \$24 for fungicide,

## Key Points

- Fungicide experts recommend a scout-and-see approach.
- Plot data reveal larger response where disease was worst.
- Higher inputs, thinner margins may dictate '09 fungicide use.

Bradley puts breakeven at 6 bushels per acre.

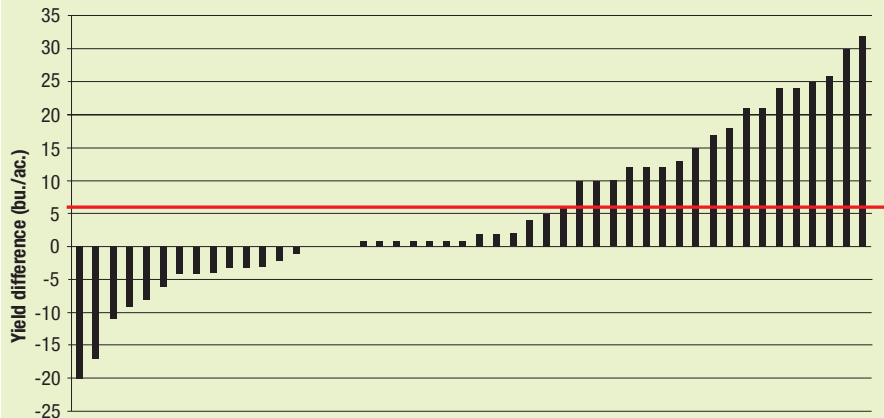
## Sticking with IPM

Like a lot of his colleagues, Bradley doesn’t like to see a blanket approach to fungicide application. Fungicides are another management tool and can be used in an integrated pest management program. “But IPM is not just spraying everything. It has to do with looking at risks and thresholds,” Bradley explains. He also acknowledges that he and his fellow researchers need to develop better thresholds for disease treatment.

At Burrus Hybrids’ winter outlook meeting, a quick survey showed a trend toward scouting. A look at results:

- 13% of growers plan to increase acres sprayed.

## Disease made fungicide pay in 2008



Through tests at eight locations across Illinois, the University of Illinois’ Carl Bradley found that fungicides increased yields by an average of 5.5 bushels per acre. Yield bumps of at least 6 bushels per acre — a breakeven yield increase — occurred nearly 40% of the time.

SOURCE: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

- 10% plan to stay the same as in '08.
- 14% plan to decrease acres sprayed.
- 43% plan to scout.
- 20% plan not to spray.

The results, says Burrus’ Gary Wenger, reveal that pro-

ducers are committing early on to spraying corn-on-corn acres and hybrids known to be susceptible to disease. That’s a smart move, he says. Wenger still recommends a scout-and-see approach, but acknowledges that farmers can’t scout every acre. “Agronomically, it’s right to scout and see if there’s a disease. We don’t need fungicide resistance.”

## The bottom line

In January, BASF received EPA approval to officially label Headline fungicide for improving plant health. But Bradley questions what that really means, when part of plant health means controlling disease while another part reflects physiological changes.

“It depends on what plant

health really is,” he says. Strobilurins, the fungicide class in which the active ingredient belongs, can inhibit ethylene production, which triggers leaf dropping. “We’ve observed occasionally that treated plants stay green longer, but that doesn’t necessarily mean there’s a benefit to it,” Bradley explains. “We haven’t seen a yield increase because of it.”

Economics may already be shaping the '09 fungicide season. Curless Flying Service reports that as of mid-April, their booked orders are at 60% of what they were a year ago. Wenger says it’s not hard to see why. “As dollars get tighter, it’s a tougher decision. Now as inputs are higher and there’s a little less margin, guys are thinking about it more.”

## Help point out hazards

**F**OR every order that comes into Curless Flying Service, there’s a place on the load sheet for listing potential aerial hazards in and around the field. Wind turbines, cell-phone towers and large power lines are typical, and are relatively easy to spot from the air. But the one that gets Harley Curless — and nearly got him last summer — is something called a meteorological tower,

or met tower, in pilot terms.

Erected by wind companies to log wind generation potential, met towers are little more than a 190-foot pole sticking straight up from the ground. Curless says it’s not unusual for them to be put up during the growing season. The danger is that they’re incredibly difficult for pilots to see, and are intentionally built to dodge the 200-foot lighting requirement. In some

cases, the company works directly with a landowner, and a farmer tenant may not even know it’s out there.

Last summer, Curless had made two passes in a field when his peripheral vision happened to catch sight of a tower. He’d come dangerously close to it, and it wasn’t listed on his load sheet.

The take-home? Know what’s in your field, and make sure your aerial applicator knows it, too. It can be a matter of life or death.