

# Don't let down your guard against rust



## For Starters

By CHERRY BRIESER STOUT

**T**HE sound of a tornado siren from the nearby town of Argenta roused my family out of our warm beds a record number of times this spring.

Twice in one week, we made a bleary-eyed trek down to our basement, with flashlights, cell phones and hostile house cats in tow. Too many late nights watching fast-moving super storm cells on the Doppler and listening to dire warnings of the local TV station's storm team were wearing us down. We felt oversaturated by storm hype, almost immune to the warnings.

Nevertheless, when we ventured outside the next day, we were grateful for the extensive and early storm warnings. While my family was taking cover in the basement, a tornado had apparently come down our road like a rock skipping over a pond. The twister uprooted trees and sections of neighbors' barns to the east and west. It was Mother Nature's reminder to pay attention to early warning systems.

Heeding warnings and being pre-

pared is smart, whether facing potentially dangerous weather, a pest invasion or crop pathogen. Storms are hit-and-miss forces of nature; ditto for many crop maladies.

### Homeland Security vs. rust

We may have dodged the Asian soybean rust bullet in 2005, but we'd be foolish to let down our defenses now.

Like a sturdy basement in a tornado, Illinois is fortified to handle rust. Virtually no other crop disease or pest has received so much advance warning and time to prepare. A coalition of producer and industry groups, land-grant universities and government agencies have joined forces and put together a well-organized surveillance and monitoring system.

Even U.S. Homeland Security is helping prepare for a soybean rust invasion, with a \$57,000 grant to the Illinois Department of Agriculture to beef up Illinois' early warning system. (See our story on Page 6.)

The Homeland Security grant was given to the Illinois Department of Agriculture because rust is on the government's list of potential terrorist agents.

Initially, I was caught off-guard by the connection between terrorism and Asian soybean rust. Granted, our open and extensive agriculture and food

system provides potential targets for terrorist attacks. And, yes, it's vital to defend our agriculture and food system. "But is Asian soybean rust a likely terrorist tool?" I asked IDOA Director Chuck Hartke. Probably not, he concedes.

"I think there's a greater chance of rust being introduced into Illinois by visitors coming back from Florida [or Brazil] and carrying it on their shoes."

### Rust realities

Historically, most destructive plant diseases and pathogens have entered the United States by natural means or trade routes. Yet, it's good to know that the Homeland Security Department isn't indifferent to this potentially devastating disease.

The reality is that with or without the help of terrorists, rust is likely to find its way here. Soybean rust is a pathogen that can take a big bite out of the state's \$3 billion soybean crop. It reproduces quickly, devastates yields and moves long distances on wind currents.

At this writing, rust isn't yet in

Illinois. Much depends on winds carrying spores from Southern states during the growing season, and whether we have the right environmental conditions (warm and moist) for an infection to occur.

The key is to catch rust early and be ready if and when it hits. You can't play catch-up with this disease.

Preparing for rust can also provide us with valuable experience for other potential crop-threatening disasters in the future. Asian soybean rust wasn't on the radar when University of Illinois Extension put its Digital Distance Diagnostics Imaging system in place six years ago. The online plant clinic will be a valuable tool this growing season as a fast and free way to determine if you have rust in your fields.

With the growing number of invasive species plaguing Illinois fields, it all adds up to a great investment in agricultural homeland security and infrastructure for future threats we haven't even considered.

You can never be too prepared.

## Letters

### Down on animal ID

I run 65 head of cows and I'm very opposed to a national animal identification system ("Animal ID qualms," May cover story). It's the final nail in the coffin in vertical integration for the cow-calf business. Why? All this information is going into one data bank. Don't you think the Cargills, the Swifts and ConAgras would like to know this information? We can't even keep hackers out of our computers.

When a cow craps in the creek, it's pollution. When a deer does it, it's conservation. Is the DNR going to tag diseased deer running around?

We have enough pressure the way it is. How can we compete?

Someday, we're going to be begging for farmers in this country, like we're begging now for oil.

Mike Nail  
Camp Point

Nothing that I have read warrants such a redundant program that seems to be full of cost overruns and less than competent administration.

We have always had animal ID (fire brand) and trace-back. That is precisely how we have all but eradicated theft of our cattle and bangs from our herds. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize the financial windfall a company will experience by such a program. All one has to do is to add up all the cattle traded on any given week, month or year. Then, multiply that by what an ID is supposed to cost.

But, what if the projected cost is not \$3 per head. What if the cost runs up to \$20 or even \$30 a head?

If you think this is far-fetched, ask an Australian cattleman what he is paying. The president of the Australia Beef Association called it the worst one single thing ever to hit the producers. They were told the cost would be \$3 a head; it is now \$37 a head and still rising.

Animal ID is not a cure for anything other than low profits in companies wishing to sell products connected to the ID concept.

As a fifth-generation cattle producer who believes Mother Nature is the greatest teacher and common sense the greatest guide, I can see absolutely no value in this program.

Ron Freeman  
Jacksonville

### Thanks to a Master friend

I was surprised and happy to see the face of an old friend on the cover of the March 2006 issue of *Prairie Farmer*.

Jim Walter and I were classmates at the U of I. It was Jim's patient tutelage that saved me, albeit narrowly, from failing a basic computer science course in the spring of 1970. The "narrowly" part was my fault, not Jim's.

I don't remember whether I thanked him properly at the time, and I have not seen him since. So thanks, Jim, and my congratulations on your being chosen as a Master Farmer.

Tom Fogerson  
Decatur

### Health-care hostage

I am writing in response to your latest column (My Generation, March, Page 14) concerning rising health-care costs.

On the positive side, we have to admit that there are procedures and cures that were not available 50 or 60 years ago. I would be close to being a cripple if both of my knee joints had not been replaced. Such additional benefits do not come without a cost.

As to the negative side, I would refer first to part of our local radio station's (WCAZ-AM 990) business slogan. It says, "Government is not the answer to our problems; government is the problem."

I am 82. I am sickened by the way your generation is held hostage to pay the pensions and much of the health care for those of my generation. It is unconscionable. Instead of senior discounts, businesses should have family discounts for those with children.

Phil Clark  
Carthage

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