Don’t let cutworms catch you off guard

By TOM J. BECHMAN

THERE’S an old story that talks about the livestock farmer who beds up his livestock on a winter’s night. Having done all he can, he can sleep well, even on a windy night. Scouting for cutworm in corn is a lot like that. It’s not a pest that’s going to hit every field every year. But if you scout and keep your guard up, you can sleep well at night knowing you’ve done all you can.

Three agronomists from the Indiana Certified Crop Advisors believe scouting for cutworms is well worth the effort. They include Steve Dlugosz, agronomist, Harvest Land Co-op; Gene Flaningam, Flaningam Ag Consulting LLC, Vincennes; and Dan Ritter, Newton County Extension ag educator.

Here’s a question for the panel, plus their responses.

Is it worth scouting for cutworms? If so, how do I do it?

CUT AND CHEW: Black cutworm larvae can create havoc. Look for them in spots within a field covered with green growth early in the season. Moths were flying into Illinois by the first week of April.

What do I do if I find some?

Dlugosz: Corn is susceptible to cutworm damage from the time it emerges until the V5 (five-leaf) stage. Fields with early weed growth are most attractive to the egg-laying moths, and provide a good food source until corn emerges.

Early-feeding damage appears as small, inconspicuous holes on the lower leaves. At this time most of the larvae are still very small and difficult to find. The good news is this feeding damage has no impact on yield. The bad news is the small larvae will rapidly grow in size as daily temperatures increase, and feeding damage may increase dramatically.

Treatment is advised when 3% to 5% of the plants show cutworm damage. If some damage is evident, but you’ve not reached the treatment threshold, recheck in two to three days.

Flaningam: Cutworms can cause significant stand loss if left unchecked. Moth flight is the first thing that indicates when you should begin scouting. The cutworm moth will migrate in from the Southern states and select a field with lots of winter annuals, a soybean stubble field or a manured field to lay eggs. Most universities will have weekly moth flight counts from pheromone traps. Pay attention to sudden spikes in moth count.

Scout at least five different areas of a field. Check 20 consecutive plants in a row, and count the number of plants that show any sign of leaf feeding, along with cut or wilted plants. The size of the insect also plays a part in treatment thresholds.

Ritter: Scouting is always worth the time and effort invested. While scouting for cutworm, you will be scouting for other pests and noting overall crop conditions. So how do you scout for cutworm? First get a copy of ID-179, the “Corn and Soybean Field Guide” from Purdue University. Next check its weekly Pest & Crop newsletter. A notice will be given as when to begin scouting.

Collect 10 black cutworm larvae while scouting. Use the chart in ID-179 to determine the instar stage. If 3% to 5% of plants show damage, and two or more larvae are in the fourth through sixth instar stage, treatment is recommended.