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SCOUT FOR CUTWORMS AS CROPS EMERGE

Cutworms have recently been reported in southwest North Dakota and eastern Montana as far north as Sheridan County. Cutworm species potentially active in our area include army, pale western, and dingy. Cutworms are caterpillars that can feed on a variety of host plants including winter wheat, spring wheat, field peas, lentils, soybean, sugarbeet, sunflower, canola, and alfalfa. Broadleaf crops seeded at lower populations tend to be at the greatest risk for yield loss from cutworm feeding. Crops are most susceptible to cutworm damage when they are small and tend to outgrow the risk posed by cutworms once they have 4 to 6 true leaves.

Cutworms usually spend daylight hours resting under residues on the soil surface or burrowed an inch to three inches into the soil. They emerge at dusk and feed at night or on overcast and wet days. Signs of cutworm feeding can include leaves removed a few inches above the soil surface or the more characteristic situation of plants clipped off at the ground level. Where cutworm densities are high, you may see patches of wilting and/or missing plants that have been clipped. In peas and lentils, seedlings with 2 or 3 sprouts may indicate that the seedling is re-growing after being clipped by a cutworm. To scout for cutworms, examine at least 5 sites within a field by looking for damaged plants and then digging around those plants to look for cutworms under any residues or in the top few inches of soil. Use a trowel to first scrape away residues from an area of about one square foot and examine the soil surface carefully for cutworms. Doing this before digging may help reveal cutworms hiding in the residue before possibly burying them in the soil once you start digging. The economic threshold for cutworms varies by crop: alfalfa 3 to 4 cutworms per square foot (2 per square foot in new stands), chickpeas/ field peas/ lentils 2 to 3 cutworms per square yard, small grains 4 to 5 cutworms per square foot, and soybean 1 cutworm per 3 feet of row or when 20% of plants are cut.

Controlling cutworms is most beneficial when the majority of cutworms found are less than 1" long. Once cutworms near their maximum size of 1.5" to 2" their feeding slows down or stops. Spraying large cutworms is unlikely to be economical as they have already completed most of their feeding. Several post emergent foliar insecticides are effective on cutworms, but timing the application to coincide with cutworm activity is important to maximize control. Time insecticide applications to coincide with cutworm feeding at dusk, night, or dawn. Consult the [2016 ND Field Crop Insect Management Guide](#) for insecticide recommendations. As with all pesticides, read and follow the label instructions.



Left photo: Pale western cutworm
(source Phil Sloderbeck, bugwood.org)

Right photo: Dingy cutworm
(source Canadian National Collection, bugwood.org)