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DON'T LET EARLY PESTS, DISEASE TRIM YOUR WHEAT YIELD POTENTIAL

Early-season fungicides, insecticides critical to fruitful wheat green-up

With the arrival of spring green-up, mid-Atlantic and mid-South wheat farmers have reason for optimism as the crop stretches its legs and emerges from winter dormancy. A warm spring and the right fertility program can inject vigor into the crop, but can also provide opportunity for pests to inflict economic damage without the right products applied to control them.

Insect pests — namely, cereal aphids — can inflict damage themselves, but they're also a carrier of potentially damaging disease like barley yellow dwarf virus, also a potential yield robber. On top of these dangers, a warm early spring can also open the door to weeds like wild garlic, which, allowed to thrive early, can prevent a wheat crop from reaching its full yield potential.

Treat early but scout earlier

A combination of the right inputs — crop protectants and foliar products — can help provide early-season crop vigor while creating conditions in which these threats to crop output can be easily controlled. Applying the right product is far from a given; determining the most effective strategy depends first on in-depth crop scouting, especially when the crop is emerging from winter dormancy, according to Hagerstown, Maryland-based Southern States Cooperative Senior Agronomist Ken Sechler. That's especially true given the variability in economic thresholds for pests like aphids for farmers around the mid-Atlantic region.

"Beginning with green-up, we are always scouting, especially if the weather warms up into the 50s and 60s early on," he says. "We scout for aphids because they may transmit the barley yellow dwarf virus that can impact yield. So in addition to green-up fertility, we want to confirm whether we need to add an insecticide to control early aphid pressures."

Given the prevalence of no-till in his area, Sechler says it's also important to be attentive to any potential weed pressures early in the spring, especially with winter annuals like wild garlic, which can become prolific if left untreated. This adds to the importance and value of scouting shortly after a wheat crop begins early green-up.

"Much of our wheat is milling quality, so it will get docked at the receiving station if it has garlic in it. And garlic can spread quickly if it gets into the corner of a field," Sechler says. "Weed control can be addressed early on at green-up if we have an infestation of winter annuals. We have to be scouting early."

Controlling disease occurrence with fungicide

A warm early spring with ample moisture is a recipe for quick wheat green-up. It's also a recipe for conditions optimal for the development of potentially costly crop diseases. In no-till fields especially, a few fungal diseases can get an early start and become exponentially more damaging and difficult to control later in the growing season if not adequately controlled early on, Sechler says.

"In the East, with the humidity we have — especially with no-till — we have good reasons to use a fungicide. The fungal pathogens from continuous no-till get into young wheat plants and can cause various diseases," he says. "Powdery mildew is a big one, especially if no-tilling wheat after corn. That's one of the main reasons we like to apply a fungicide from jointing through flag-leaf stage."

An early application of Topguard® fungicide, which Sechler recommends (Feekes scale 3-7), is the first in a two-pass system that helps support early vegetative growth in addition to knocking down early-season disease pressures. A second application of Bayer Prosaro® fungicide when the crop begins to flower can help sustain plant vigor and help prevent head diseases from robbing yield potential.

Finally, Sechler recommends adding a foliar fertilizer product — like a Monty's Plant Food (Microhance) micronutrient mix — to bolster spring vegetative and reproductive growth.

Looking to better control early-season disease and pest pressures in your wheat crop this spring? Start the process by reaching out to your nearest Southern States Cooperative agronomist.