

Lab welcomes strange and unusual

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Krista Zuzak, senior research technologist at the Alberta Plant Health Lab, shows a vial containing a clubroot gall. Clubroot is one of the crop diseases the new lab can accurately test and identify. | Barb Glen photo

An unusual insect? Suspected crop disease? Odd fungi? Alberta now has a diagnostics lab that can figure out what pest might be ailing crops.

The plant health lab, located at the Crop Development Centre North in Edmonton, had a “soft” opening in May and is starting to receive samples.

Krista Zuzak, senior research technologist with the lab, said a full opening may occur this fall but that has yet to be determined.

“Alberta Agriculture is opening the new plant diagnostic lab because we’ve kind of identified a gap in the agriculture industry of where you go if you’re seeing strange things in your crop or unknowns that are showing up,” Zuzak said during the recent Farming Smarter field school in Leth-bridge.

“The services we’re offering include the diagnosis of plant pest problems including diseases, weed identification and insect identification.”

Zuzak said the new lab will conduct whole plant assessments, microscopy, culturing and molecular diagnostics, among other tests.

Samples are only being accepted from agricultural fieldmen, Alberta Agriculture researchers and applied research associations.

“Because we’re offering it for now free of charge and we’re a new lab and kind of still establishing our capacity, we can’t just accept samples and be publicly open right now,” said Zuzak.

As a government funded lab, its goal is to offer more specialized diagnostics, so it does not compete with private or commercial labs that do more basic crop testing, she added.

The Alberta government first announced its plans for the diagnostics lab in early 2013. It operates under the agriculture department’s pest surveillance branch.

Three full-time staff include a research scientist, a senior research technologist and one other technologist. As well, three people work on pest surveillance, two of them seasonal.

“We also do a little bit of research,” she said.

“Our ministry still supports agricultural research so we’ve been doing a little bit, but the only caveat for us is that our research, we want it to feed into diagnostics.”

She had samples of fungi, clubroot and other crop pests on hand at the field school to show farmers.