

Farmers get ideas how to dull effectiveness of cutworms

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Agriculture industry professionals got a lesson in cutworms and their destructive nature at the 2017 annual Farming Smarter Conference.

On Dec. 6, Kevin Floate took to the stage to talk about the cutworm outbreaks that occur within the prairie lands over the year and the economic damage they're causing to farmers. With many farming families and businesses in attendance, the problem of these pesky creatures within southern Alberta hit home with the audience, and Floate provided options to control the continued outbreaks.

"These cutworms can have a big economic impact and that's the reason we are concerned about them," said Floate, a research scientist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. "These insects are native to Canada and over the years as our landscapes have changed, we have gotten rid of some of our plant diversity and replaced it with certain plant species that these cutworms invade more."

Floate, who received his bachelor's degree in agriculture (with honours) and his master's in biology from the University of Saskatchewan, now works with the Lethbridge division of Agricultural and Agri-Food Canada to study a broad-range of insect-related topics, with an emphasis on cutworms and their impact on crops across the Prairies.

Floate is well-versed with these pests and recently authored a book titled "Cutworm: Pests of Crops on the Canadian Prairies: Identification and Management Guide" which he shared snippets of with audiences at the conference to help those struggling with the problems find better solutions.

"These outbreaks affect all of the province," Floate said, outlining why it's important for farmers and owners of land to be aware of these insects.

"With the most common being the redback cutworm, then the pale cutworm, which is white in colour, and the dingy cutworm, which is green in colour, species identification can be critical for effective cutworm control."

Cutworms which differ in biology, life cycle and crop preference can be dangerous to many plant species grown by farmers in southern Alberta as they devour the crop either from the roots or stem of the plant.

However, Floate highlighted that broadleaf plants including canola and pea, wheat, lentils, barley and flax are the most commonly affected crops grown on the Prairies.

Floate summarized some effective methods in relation to cutworm scouting, control and their natural enemies.

"Scouting is the most important thing you can do for cutworm control," said Floate. "Farmers should check their fields often in the spring and early summer, ideally in the early morning or evening since most feed when it's cooler or actively humid outside."

Floate also offered key identifying methods for farmers whose crops have been victim to cutworms such as severed stems, dying plants and climbing cutworms on the plants themselves. He added that large flocks of birds in a specific area on land can also be a good indication of an outbreak.

However, identifying the problem isn't the only step farmers can take in controlling these pests, as Floate offered a number of options for the removal of these cutworms, once identified.

"There are different chemical methods of control and the specific products for that change each year. However questions do need to be asked when using chemical methods such as, does the density of the outbreak exceed your economic threshold? Also, if they are no longer feeding you may not have to spray your lands."

Floate added if farmers do choose to spray their lands with these harsh pest-killing chemicals then they should be sure to target affected areas only with a 10-metre-wide buffer strip.

All the information and control methods given during the presentation can be found online in the book he authored at http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/aac-aafc/A59-23-2015-eng.pdf