



Agronomic Spotlight

Western Bean Cutworm Management for Corn

- Western bean cutworm (WBC), can be a severe pest of corn and dry beans, but not soybean.
- If 5 to 8% of corn plants have WBC egg masses or small larvae, that have not moved into the silks or ear tip, consider an insecticide application.
- Insecticide application timing is critical for WBC control as once larvae enter the ear, insecticide application is ineffective.

Western bean cutworm (WBC) can be a severe pest of corn and dry beans (but not soybean). WBC larvae feeding can reduce yield potential and grain quality and it is considered a late-season pest (Figure 1). Unlike many other cutworm species, WBC larvae do not cut plant stems, they feed on the reproductive parts of plants. In the past, WBC was primarily limited to the western Great Plains but over the last 15 years has expanded its range eastward as far as Pennsylvania.¹



Figure 1. WBC larvae feeding on ear.

Life Cycle and Identification

Western bean cutworm overwinter in the soil as a non-feeding larvae (prepupae), then pupate, and later emerge as adult moths. There is one generation per year. As early as mid-June moth flights begin, then peak in mid- to late-July and usually end by late August.² However, adult emergence and peak flight periods can vary depending on climate and location. Farmers may be able to receive updates concerning WBC moth catches from flights at: <http://www.insectforecast.com>.

Growing degree days (GDD), base 50 °F accumulation since May 1, can be used to predict adult moth emergence. GDD totals for 25%, 50%, and 75% moth emergence are 1319, 1422, and 1536, respectively.¹

Moths are about 0.75 inch-long, primarily grayish-brown, with a wing-span of approximately 1.5 inches (Figure 2). Identifying characteristics for moths include a whitish stripe at the front of the forewing and two cream-colored, outlined shapes immediately behind. These identifying shapes are a circular spot approximately halfway along the length of the forewing and a kidney-shaped mark along the same line, approximately two-thirds of the way to the wingtip.



Figure 2. Adult moth with whitish stripe at the front margin of each forewing (indicated by the red arrows).



Figure 3. WBC egg masses: freshly laid pearly-white egg mass (left) and close to hatching purple egg mass (right).

Western bean cutworm moths prefer to lay eggs on late-whorl stage corn that is near pollination. Eggs are laid on the upper surface of leaves, in masses of 5 to 200 with an average of about 50 eggs per mass. The eggs are pin-head in size, dome shaped with ridges, and usually laid on the flag leaf. Eggs are pearly white when first laid and within several days they turn tan (Figure 3-left). Shortly before hatching eggs turn a purple coloration (Figure 3-right).

Eggs hatch in about 5 to 7 days. Larvae remain clumped near the egg mass for several hours after hatching, feeding on their egg shells (Figure 4). Larvae go through six larval-instar stages and feed for about a month.³ Shortly after hatching, larvae move into protected areas of the corn plant, feeding on leaf tissue, fallen anthers/pollen, and silks as they develop and move to the developing ear.



Figure 4. Newly hatched WBC larvae.

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The newly hatched larvae are initially dark with black heads. Larvae will lighten to a light tan or pinkish hue with subtle longitudinal stripes as they develop. Fourth-instar and larger larvae, 0.5 to 1.5 inches long, are readily identified by two black “rectangles” behind the now-orange head, and generally have a smooth skin (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The two black rectangles behind the head capsule is an identifying characteristic of WBC larvae.

Fourth through sixth-instar larvae are often found feeding on kernels in the ear, usually on the tip but sometimes the sides (Figure 1). Entry holes and/or frass are not always visible; therefore, scouting for WBC larvae should include pulling back corn husks. A single egg mass may produce larvae that infest nearby plants within a 6 to 10 foot circle, as plant to plant movement is common.

Field Scouting

Begin scouting by examining twenty consecutive corn plants in at least five locations in the field. Inspect the upper three or four leaves of each plant for WBC egg masses or young larvae. Continue scouting for 7 to 10 days after peak moth flight. If the tassel has not emerged when the eggs hatch, larvae will move into the whorl and feed on the developing pollen grains in the tassel. As the tassel emerges, larvae will move down the plant to green silks and then into the silk channel to feed on the developing ear.

Management and Treatment

If 5 to 8% of corn plants have egg masses and/or small larvae, consider an insecticide application.¹ If an application is needed, timing is critical. If most eggs have hatched, an insecticide application should be made after 95% of the tassels have emerged, but before the larvae move into the silks and ear tip to feed. If the eggs have not hatched and plants have tasseled, application should be timed for when most of the eggs are expected to hatch. Purple eggs should hatch within about 24 hours. Control is more difficult when the larvae reach the silks or ear tips. Infestations averaging several WBC larvae per ear may result in 30 to 40% reduction in yield potential.⁴

There are numerous insecticide products labeled for WBC larvae control. Consult your local Extension Office for insecticide recommendations. Insecticide products for WBC control have a pre-harvest interval ranging from 14 to 30 days and many are restricted use pesticides.⁵ There is some evidence that pyrethroid insecticides will force larvae out of protective areas (silks and ear tips) due to the irritation properties of the active ingredient.¹ These insecticides may be more effective should the larvae reach the silks prior to treatment.¹

SmartStax® RIB Complete® corn blend products offer broad-spectrum control against many above and below-ground insects including WBC. The built-in insect protection from SmartStax RIB Complete corn blend products may reduce the need for WBC insecticide applications; however, fields should still be scouted and if heavy pressure exists, insecticides may be warranted.

Sources

¹ Seymour, R.C., Hein, G.L., and Wright, R.J. 2010. Western bean cutworm in corn and dry beans. G2013. NebGuide. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension. <http://extensionpublications.unl.edu/>.

² Michel, A.P., Krupke, C.H., Baute, T.S., and Difonzo, C.D. 2010. Ecology and management of the western bean cutworm (Lepidoptera: Noctuidae) in corn and dry beans. *Journal of Integrated Pest Management*, volume 1, Number 1. <https://extension.entm.purdue.edu/>.

³ Western bean cutworm. *Field Crops IPM*. Purdue University.

<https://extension.entm.purdue.edu/fieldcropsipm/insects/western-bean-cutworm.php>.

⁴ Peairs, F.B. 2014. Western bean cutworm: characteristics and management in corn and dry beans. Fact sheet no. 5.538. Colorado State University Extension.

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⁵ Krupke, C.H., Obermeyer, J.L., and Bledsoe, L.W. 2016. Corn insect control recommendations. *Field Crops*. Purdue University. <http://extension.entm.purdue.edu/>. Web sources verified 05/16/16. 140702134055

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