

PLANT DISEASE AND INSECT ADVISORY



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Wheat Head Armyworm Causing Concern as Harvest Progresses Tom Royer, Extension Entomologist



I have received several reports of damaged wheat kernels arriving in loads of wheat that were freshly harvested from the field. In some cases, they were accompanied by a few light colored caterpillars. Damaged kernels appeared to be hollowed out and resembled damage by stored grain weevils. We have identified this insect as the wheat head armyworm.

This insect goes through two generations each year, and passes the winter as a pupa in the soil. Adult moths lay eggs on plants in the spring, and the larva feed directly on the grain heads, mostly at night. The caterpillars range in color from gray to greenish with a distinct yellow, white and brown stripes going lengthwise across the body. They typically have a larger head relative to their body. The adult moth has a dark streak running the length of the forewing, with an interruption near the middle of the forewing. Because the larvae are so variable in color, the best way to identify them is to send in a sample to the Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Lab.

This insect typically is found in greater numbers along the margins of fields, although from reports I have received, this appears to be less the case this year. There is no established treatment threshold for this pest simply because it so rarely (once every 10-15 years) causes economic damage, and the damage goes unnoticed until the grain is harvested. Treating a field now will not help, because the larvae have already done their damage, and are not now capable of feeding on the mature wheat.



Look to this website from Kansas State for additional information:

<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/agronomy-block2/wheathead.pdf>

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