

PLANT DISEASE AND INSECT ADVISORY



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Wheat Head Armyworm Being Reported as Harvest Progresses Tom Royer, Extension Entomologist



We have received scattered reports of damaged wheat kernels arriving in loads of wheat that were freshly harvested from the field, accompanied by a few light colored caterpillars. Damaged kernels appeared to be hollowed out and resembled damage by stored grain weevils. Some caterpillars were also sent into the Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Laboratory that were found feeding on weeping lovegrass seed, and identified 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 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. There is no established treatment threshold for this pest because it so rarely causes economic damage and the damage goes unnoticed until the grain is harvested. Treating a field now for wheat head armyworm will not be of much help because the larvae are becoming mature and have already completed most of their potential damage. Insecticide applications to control them will require that harvest be delayed by 7 days or more.

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Director, Plant Disease and Insect Diagnostic Laboratory

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