

News Column

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ALFALFA WEEVIL

One of the things I love about the farm where I grew up is the tranquility. On a calm day, when there is no wind, it isn't uncommon to step outside and hear,.....nothing.

Listen closely and you can hear yourself breathe, and you might even imagine that you can hear your own heartbeat, but you'll hear nothing else – just pure quiet. The nearest neighbors are over a mile away. The highway is a mile and a half away, and doesn't get much traffic. And the power lines don't even seem to hum at the end of the road where Mom lives.

I was enjoying some of that wonderful peace and quiet Easter Sunday while on a walk with my brother, my son, and one of my son's friends, when I heard the sound of water. More specifically, what I heard was the sound of water under pressure, like it sounds when you put your thumb on the end of a hose to squirt someone.

The sound was easy to track and led us directly to a black plastic pipe sticking out of the ground about 20 feet from the path leading to the old barn. The land sloped to the north, away from the driveway and there was a big mud hole next to the pipe, with cattle hoof prints in the mud and fresh cow pies nearby.

Closer inspection revealed a capped gray connector that was shoved in the end of the black plastic pipe and secured with a hose clamp. There was a crack just below the cap that widened when I applied pressure toward the south and would almost close when I pushed toward the north. Looking back, I could have almost stopped the water flow with baling wire and stick,

by applying pressure in the right direction.

Instead, I dug around in the shop for a half hour, sifting through plumbing fittings, hose clamps, bolts, and leaves in an old cardboard box I found in the mess under the workbench. I eventually found a brand new water spigot, and a fitting it would screw into, to replace the cracked and leaking fitting. It was Easter Sunday, so buying new parts wasn't an option.

I found Teflon tape in a paper bag in the basement and I found a monster screwdriver in the garage after another 10 minutes of searching. The actual repair was really easy. It took about five minutes.

Of course, this all has nothing to do with today's alfalfa weevil topic,....except for the fact that trips to the farm also send me on a trip down memory lane to the many days spent swathing and baling alfalfa. Swathing alfalfa was always my favorite job – I love the smell. Freshly baled alfalfa hay is also high on my list of olfactory sensory pleasures.

But before we can enjoy the smell of fresh cut hay, we need to control alfalfa weevil larvae so there will be hay to swath. Left uncontrolled, alfalfa weevil larvae can devastate the first cutting of alfalfa in the spring.

Word on the street (or maybe someone sent me a text with a picture) is that alfalfa weevil larvae are already active and doing their thing – eating holes in alfalfa leaves. It is time to scout fields, and spray with an insecticide if weevil numbers are high.

What is the treatment threshold? You'll find varying answers on the internet, often with recommendations based on the cost of treatment and the price of hay. When alfalfa is 12 to 18 inches tall and hay is \$250 per ton you'll find those economic threshold charts telling you to spray when you find one larvae per stem in a 30-stem count.

Other sources will say to treat when you see damage on 30 to 50 percent of the plants.

With small alfalfa, three to seven inches tall, it only takes one to two larvae per stem to cause significant damage to 30 to 50 percent of the plants.

If you can see damage from the road, the decision is easy. You need to get busy. A better approach though is to sample before plants start to turn white. Break off 30 plants throughout the field, and shake each into a white bucket to dislodge the larvae. At this time of year, if you have 30 or more larvae in the bucket after sampling 30 stems, an insecticide treatment is warranted.

Take your pick of products. If it is labeled for alfalfa weevil control, it should work.

If you have questions you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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