Last week heavy populations of armyworm were reported in western New York and early this week we have observed significant damage to several corn and grass fields in Franklin and Grand Isle Counties of Vermont. Damage to second cut grass hay, field corn, and sweet corn has been reported in these areas.

Please don’t panic, but do go out and scout your corn and grass fields for armyworms. When full grown, the caterpillars can be almost 1.5 inches long. The caterpillars are usually greenish or brownish, but can be almost black. The sides and back of the caterpillar have light colored stripes running along the body. The caterpillars normally feed at night and much damage can occur before they mature. The preferred foods are grasses including corn, small grains, and forage species. They first strip the leaves and then consume midribs, seed heads and finally stems. They will feed on other plants if grasses are unavailable. Feeding will start on the lower leaves and move upwards. A large population can strip an entire field in just a few days. When the field is eaten they “march’ to adjacent fields.

**Corn Fields**

In corn, armyworms usually confine their feeding to the leaf margins except when populations are very large, and then they consume all the leaves except for the tougher midrib. Feeding starts on the lower leaves and as these leaves are eaten, the armyworms move to the upper leaves. Look for ragged holes and pellet-like droppings in the whorls and scattered on the ground. Larvae do not tunnel into the stalk and they do not feed on the growing point, at least on larger plants.

Cornfields that are most susceptible include fields that are either minimum or no-tilled into grass sod or fields infested with grass weeds. Cornfields that have grassy weeds sprayed postemergence with an herbicide should be closely scouted as the weeds begin to die. Armyworms, if present, will move immediately to the corn. In some fields armyworms have eaten the young corn nearly to the ground. Many farmers are asking if their corn plants can recover from the defoliation. It is recognized that a corn plant can recover from severe degrees of defoliation; the extent of recovery will depend upon the stage of plant growth at the time of damage and the extent of the damage. Generally crop loss is negligible when defoliation occurs very early in the growth of the plant. The corn crop can recover easily since its growing point remains below ground and there is still potential to produce more leaves. However as the plants mature the level of recovery will be greatly reduced.

Insecticide applications to control armyworm should be judiciously applied and a decision to control armyworm with an insecticide should be based on crop size or stage, armyworm size, crop damage and anticipated movement of larvae from one field to another. Besides the expense...
of application, insecticides could also kill natural insect predators that normally control armyworm. According to Cornell recommendations, an insecticide should only be applied to corn in the whorl stage if most plants are showing damage and about three larvae per plant are found. Penn State recommendations are to treat only when 25% of plants are damaged or killed. Larvae size is also important. If armyworms are less than 3/4 inch in length they still have another week or so to feed. If larvae are mostly 1 1/2 inches in length, then they are nearly done feeding and very little additional leaf injury will occur so the field should not be sprayed; it is too late for the insecticide to be of any economic benefit. A border 20 to 40 feet wide treated with insecticide will prevent armyworms from invading from or into an adjacent field or non-infested area within a field.

**Grass Hay and Pasture Fields**

Generally, armyworms first feed on the blades of the grass leaves disregarding the sheaths and stems until last. In legume/grass mixtures, the legume can remain standing with all the grass stripped out clean. However, under high larval populations, even the legume can be consumed. The question concerning perennial grasses is whether permanent damage has occurred to the stand. From our experiences in 2001, the last time we experienced a serious outbreak of armyworm, the level of damage varied tremendously. For heavily infested fields (“thousands of worms”), the larvae devoured the grass plants all the way down to the crown. Recovery was very slow to almost non-existent. Many of these fields were reseeded. However, most of fields had only damage to that growth and, once harvested, regrowth was normal. Other fields with more severe damage showed slower regrowth, but eventually fully recovered. Pastures can also be affected by armyworm. One farmer noted from 2001 that although all the grasses were eaten, about 50% of his pasture was still made up of clovers, dandelion, plantain and other broadleaf forbs. He had his animals graze the pasture immediately and it did fully recover later in the season. Before making a quick decision to till the field and reseed, it is important to wait and observe regrowth. Once regrowth commences, a small amount of manure or fertilizer could also help with the recovery. Overseeding with clovers the following spring (frost seeding) could also help increase desirable species.

There is little to no information on threshold levels for grass hay fields. Based on small grain recommendations, I suggest using 4 to 5 larvae (less than 3/4 inch in length) per square foot. Be sure to check under debris as well as on the plants for larvae. If the field is cut as a control strategy, be sure to continue monitoring surrounding fields and regrowth. In mixed legume/grass fields the armyworm will only start eating legumes when all other resources are consumed. If there are nearby corn, small grain, or grass fields, it may be prudent to spray a 20 to 40 foot border to kill invading larvae.

For more information on scouting and control options please contact Dr. Heather Darby - (802) 524-6501 or Dr. Sid Bosworth - (802) 656-0478 at the University of Vermont Extension.