

War on against cereal leaf beetle

By JOANNE SPAHR
LANCASTER — Tuesday was D-Day. More specifically, it was distribution day for cereal leaf beetle parasites in several counties around the Commonwealth. And, hopefully, D-Day also marked the beginning of the end for a large number of cereal leaf beetles in the state.

The beetle is primarily a European-Asian pest that was first identified in the United States in 1962 in southwest Michigan. A flying insect, the beetle has since spread by prevailing winds to the north and east, and to a lesser extent to the south. It did not miss Pennsylvania in its travels.

In about 1966 the cereal leaf beetle became a problem in the western part of the Commonwealth and only in the last four years has it found its way into the eastern and southeastern counties.

It does its damage in both the adult and larval stages by feeding on the leaves of oats, wheat, barley, and other small grains. The insect chews out all the green chlorophyll-containing cells. Heavy feeding gives the plant a white, frosted appearance.

In southeastern counties of Pennsylvania, where the population has only been building up over the last four years, the tactic in controlling this pest is to establish a parasite population which will grow at an equal rate as the beetle and keep it under check. This type of control — one in which natural enemies, and not pesticides, are used — is known as a biological control.

This week's drop of cereal leaf beetle parasites marked the third such consecutive attack in three years. Three agencies were involved — the United States Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, and the Cooperative Extension Service of the Pennsylvania State University.

Early on June 13, representatives of the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) collected cereal leaf beetle parasites at an insectary at Rock Springs.

After the parasites were collected and packed in specially prepared containers, they were flown to designated airports around the state where the Pennsylvania Bureau of Plant Industry coordinators distributed them to county agents waiting to pick them up.

This year, however, there was a limited number of

parasites reared at the insectary. As a result, not every county received the wasp. Only a few counties in Lancaster Farming's coverage area — including Chester and Berks — were able to receive them.

Jim Murningham, officer-in-charge of APHIS' Plant Protection Quarantine Programs in Meadville, explained that the wasps were distributed to counties where they had never before been dropped and, also, to the counties with the highest production of small grains.

For the past two years both Lancaster and York

Counties have received the cereal leaf beetle parasite and were, therefore, unable to participate this year. Lebanon County has such a small population of the beetle that treatment for it is not worthwhile, says County Agent Denis Hoke.

Tony Dobrosky, agent for York County, did note, however, that in York more calls were received in one week this year than in all of last year.

Berks County agent Herbert Wetzel says he scattered his cereal leaf beetle parasites in three drops over the entire county.

The parasites are tiny wasps imported from Europe which attack only the cereal leaf beetle and do not sting.

The wasps seek out the beetle's larvae (the growth stage following the egg stage) and lay their own eggs inside the host. When the parasite eggs hatch, the young wasps eat their way out, destroying the cereal leaf beetle larvae in the process.

The cereal leaf beetle parasite release program is part of the federal-state effort to reduce the use of pesticides in controlling

plant pests. A growing concern over contamination of the environment and a reduced cost over a long period of time has motivated the shift to biological control.

A significant economic feature of biological control is its moderating influence with respect to new infestations. Unlike chemical pesticides, biological controls as a rule only have to be repeated until parasite populations become established, according to Henry F. Nixon, Director of

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