

# Crop Management Associations

## Berks 'detective' Tom Benusa uncovers clues to stolen profits

BY JACK HUBLEY

MYERSTOWN — "I cover a lot of ground in a day's time," muses Tom Benusa, spanning a winding brook in one stride. (Those who regularly jump brooks find the two-stride method too soggy.)

With a pair of size-14 boots anchoring Benusa's frame to earth, it's obvious that he "covers a lot of ground" simply by standing still. But no moss ever grew beneath this six-foot agronomist's foundation.

As Berks County's first technician with the newly formed Berks Crop Management Association, Benusa does indeed cover plenty of ground—3,400 acres a week, to be exact. Tom is currently responsible for 19 farms, making weekly visits and advising farmers on the proper battle tactics in their never-ending fight with insects, weeds and disease.

"I do what the farmer could do if he only had the time," the Delaware Valley College agronomy graduate proclaims modestly. But hiking the Elvin Martin farm near Richland with Benusa soon reveals that his trouble-shooting skills reach well beyond that of most farmers.

One moment the insect detective is on hands and knees probing a tiny hole in the ground with his Swiss army knife in search of black cutworms.

### Pandora's Box

And in an instant he's swishing his insect net back and forth across the second-growth alfalfa for a potato leafhopper census. Inspecting the contents of the net reveals a Pandora's box of tiny beasties including flies, spittle bugs, flea beetles, alfalfa weevil larvae and, of course, those pernicious leafhoppers. Tom records the information on his clipboard, makes an estimate of plant populations in the field, then moves on to the next field.

This one's a brand new field of alfalfa that, at a distance at least, seems to be coming along well. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the lush green carpet is in fact a blanket of lambsquarter that's crowding the smaller alfalfa plants.

"It was a good year to get in the

fields early, but the dry weather has hurt everything planted this spring," says Benusa. His field work has also revealed that insects such as leafhoppers and weevils seem to have an early start this year.

Since it pays farmers to recognize these problems early, Benusa will be visiting all his clients once a week from May through October. The pace then slackens to biweekly visits from November through April.

This time of year Benusa's time is spent scouting for insect damage and potential weed problems in corn and alfalfa fields, checking corn and alfalfa populations and being on the lookout for disease problems in small grains. Checking alfalfa yields and running occasional soil tests are also part of the spring itinerary.

Though plenty of paper work is built into the job of CMA technician, Benusa's skills really begin to shine when he's pounding his beat in the "back forty".

Hiking among the rows of a young corn field, the agronomist stops in mid-stride. "Hold it! Don't move too fast. I've got to see what's hopping around here. Could be the dreaded flea beetle...which I hate." The agronomist smiles at his description of an insect small enough to get a job dotting it's. Benusa observes that they're tough to find and even tougher to catch, but he soon has a pair located on the underside of a three-leafed corn plant. Then he spots a few brothers, sisters and cousins, and all this information is quickly recorded on the clipboard. Next comes another strip of alfalfa, and then on to another cornfield where he uncovers some army worm damage, along with a single cutworm lodged in a tiny corn plant.

### An Important Find

For Benusa this cutworm is an important find, since the pest normally works the night shift, surfacing in the dark and lopping off the entire corn plant. One of these larvae can topple four to six plants before it changes into the pupa stage. But just labeling this single specimen a cutworm isn't enough, since it could be one of seven different varieties. This one

is popped into an empty film canister for a ride to Penn State and a "meeting" with university entomologists.

With the field survey completed, the agronomist heads back to the farm to write up his report and talk to the farm's owner, Elvin Landis. Benusa's prescription includes spraying as soon as possible for leafhoppers. Likewise for the flea beetles, but hold off on attacking the cutworms since the flea beetle treatment may kill two bugs with one stone. More discussion follows on dealing with the army worms and weed infested alfalfa, and finally at 4 p.m. the agronomist is heading for his last farm for the day.

Elvin Martin assesses the report, and then decides that it's time to get into the fields with his sprayer.

"The main thing is to spot any kind of disease or insects early," says Martin, admitting that his dairy operation usually prevented him from walking the fields. "I always said that the cows should come first," he asserts.

Now, with Tom on duty, Elvin isn't as concerned about potential problems going undetected. Nor is he concerned about the \$4-per-acre cost of enlisting the service, since he feels that the resulting increase in yields will more than compensate for his investment.

And Don Duncan, chairman of the Berks Crop Management Association's board of directors, agrees with that assessment. Today's farmer simply doesn't have time to scout his fields and nip potential problems in the bud, he says. Though the value of the program will vary depending on the type of operation being serviced, Duncan says that claims of cost savings in the \$8 to \$20-per-acre range are not unrealistic.

Though all the services provided are potential money savers, Duncan feels that the farmer will probably cover his fees simply by knowing his exact fertilizer needs and having the time to negotiate with a number of fertilizer company's for the coming year's requirements.

### A Slow Start

Duncan confesses that the program has been slow to catch on in Berks County, due to the present state of the farm economy. "The word is out, and everyone is interested, but not everyone is willing to jump on the band-

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Berks County's first Crop Management Association technician is Tom Benusa. Beginning April 1, Tom has been scouting 3,400 acres for the 19 farmers enrolled in the program.



Protecting an alfalfa field involves plenty of nose-to-the-ground detective work.



Based on the day's field inspection, Tom prepares a technician's report with his insect and weed control recommendations.



A few passes with the net reveals that each field is populated with an incredible variety of six-legged critters.