

Alfalfa weevil attacks plants under stress

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CARTHAGE, N.Y. — By now virtually everyone has observed the appetite of the alfalfa weevil for 1985. The extent of the losses probably won't be fully known until the forage is fed and the analysis comes back to confirm the devastation these pests cause.

Scouting fields reveals patterns of feeding which correlate with several cultural practices in alfalfa production. The first pattern which everyone recognizes is that alfalfa weevils first attack alfalfa which is under the most severe stress within a given field.

Scouting nearly always yields the largest larvae counts where soils are highest and driest. These plants typically suffer greater drought stress than plants in lower areas. Alfalfa plants, which evaporate 858 lbs. of water per lb of dry matter produced in above ground foliage, can encounter drought stress quite easily.

Other patterns began to emerge as scouting proceeded. In the Lewis and Jefferson County areas, there are widely differing recommendations and practices concerning the treatment of soils for potash, boron and copper deficiencies. Experience has shown trace mineral levels to be

sufficiently low to require additions of up to eight pounds per year of boron and copper for alfalfa. Soils treated at these rates become significantly altered from the average in only a few seasons.

Fields with higher levels of boron and copper began to experience weevil feeding as did most other fields. However, in as little as one week after 20-25 larvae were found per 5 sweeps, feeding declined to near zero. Then, 14 days later after the initial scouting, no feeding was observed. The previous injury was then apparent, now several inches below the top growth of the plants.

The impact of nutritional stress

is also influenced by the ability of the plant to access nutrients in the soil. A vivid example of how this occurs in soil was illustrated by a seemingly innocent set of wheeltracks made by a tractor over 1 year ago in a neighboring alfalfa field. The farmer had inadvertently driven into an alfalfa field with his manure spreader. In order to minimize his dilemma, he drove diagonally across the field down the slope toward the edge of the field to exit onto the main highway.

This year those wheel tracks stood out, because of the high feeding rate of the alfalfa weevil.

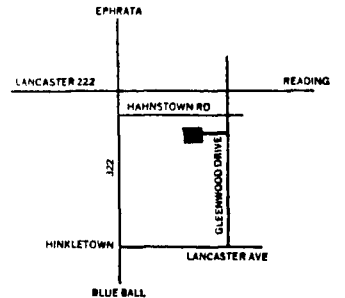
Those plants were under stress. Since only the wheel-tracks were attacked, we could conclude that the compaction had introduced the stress. Since feeding continued down the slope it seems logical that moisture was not the stress factor. The stress which these plants were under was the absence of a feeder root system. It could not develop adequately during 1984 because the soil around the top six to eight inches of the plants was too tightly compacted with the wheeltrack.

That seemingly isolated and small incident helps explain why farmers who have been using the soil aerator and high level fertility practices experienced consistently less weevil pressure in their alfalfa stands this year.

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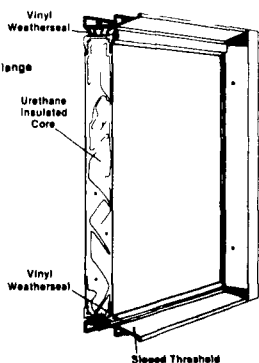
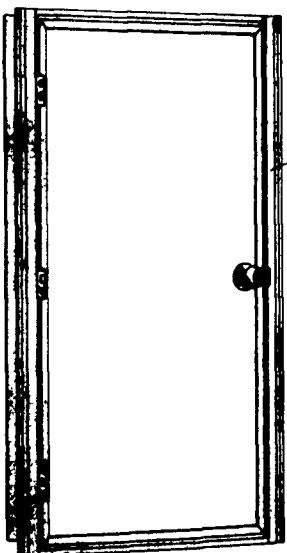
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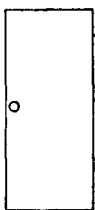
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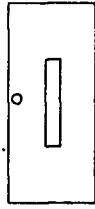
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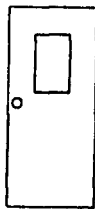
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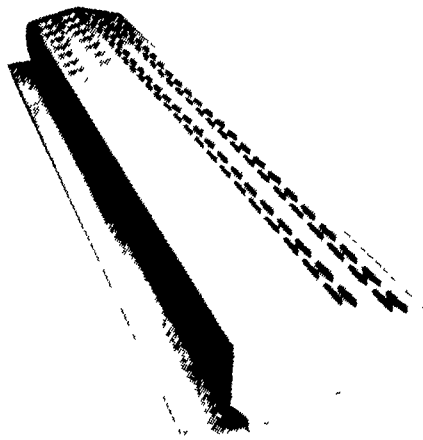
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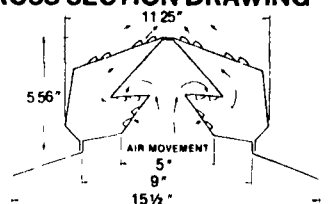


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