Mild Winter, Wet Spring Challenges Crop Protection Strategies

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If the weeds are 10- to 12-inches tall, (the situation calls for) maybe even starting over again," he said.

He said that on tilled ground where the weeds aren't that big, the herbicide program should include some things like Accent or Basis Gold. "They are going to be pretty widely used in corn this year, it looks like to me," he said.

The reason for Accent (contained in Basis Gold), he said, is that it is the only herbicide that can be widely used for grass control on corn, unless, of course, the corn is one of the new genetically enhanced varieties that are herbicide resistant.

However the specialty seed availability is restricted, and expense is greater.

Curran said he knows that the situation is presenting some problems for those farmers who had already prepared to plant with longer maturing varieties with a specific herbicide, but were delayed because of the rains.

"Now they're going to have to get something more appropriate. It's a problem for the farmer, and the commercial dealer," he said.

Grasses, Curran said, are the biggest concern. "Once foxtail in particular gets more than 6 inches tall, it becomes very difficult to kill.

"Another thing that happens when grass gets that big and hasn't been killed. It starts to compete with the corn pretty fiercely and starts taking up nitrogen, and you can see nitrogen deficiencies in small corn."

He said the taletell signs of nitrogen deficiency are yellowing and browning of the lower leaves on the corn.

He said that sidedressing is an option and one that he's certain some will employ, though he said he's not sure if the benefit outweighs starting over in that field or plot.

"A lot of times, I think corn can never really recover from the early season competition. You set it back and it seems to never completely pull out, the root system is not as deep."

He said on Thursday that at the Landisville research farm, rain has not fallen for nine days, and for those who planted this week, and for those who applied herbicides, ironically rain in the near future is essential.

He said that at the Penn State research farm at Rockspring (where the Penn State Ag Progress Days are held), the staff had just finished planting corn. He said they started Saturday and finished Wednesday.

Likewise he said he knows that corn planting activity has been high around the state this week.

"A lot of corn has gone in, in the last week, and a lot of preemergent herbicide sprayed."

Curran said that without some rain in the next couple of days, the efficacy of the herbicide may be broken down too far, or not reached the critical weed seed germination zone in the soil.

The preemergent herbicide is sprayed after planting corn so that it kills the faster growing and already germinating weed seeds and then is out of the way by the time the corn germinates.

"With (preemergent herbicides) like Prowl, within seven days of no rain, you are losing some because of photodegradation, and some volatizes, and then weeds start to germinate and there's no rainfall to move the herbicide into the weed germination zone."

From his field observations this week, Voight said that the cutworm may be a serious problem this year in corn fields with heavy infestations of chickweed.

The moth of the cutworm, a migratory insect, lays eggs in the chickweed and the larva (the gray-greenish "worm") feed on the chickweed.

After the chickweed is destroyed — either turned under, sprayed with some product such as Roundup, or both — and the corn is planted and emerges, the cutworm can destroy acres of corn to the point of requiring a replanting or change of crop.

There are several products that can be used against cutworm, though Curran said that even though this is the time of the year to be hearing of cutworm problems, he hasn't heard of much cutworm activity and isn't sure why.

But all in all, those who employ the services of crop consultants and custom operators probably have received good advice on changing strategies.

Pennsylvania law requires those who apply pesticides (other than for home and garden use) to be certified by the state Department of Agriculture and to maintain continuing education credits to maintain certification. Many should already be aware of some need for a strategic change.

Winter annuals and perrenials are the weeds infesting most fields now, but summer annuals have started and bienniels, such as Common Mullein, are growing well.

In one field Voight visited this week, the acreage was a cornucopia of problem weeds for Lebanon County.

A virtual garden of varieties, Voight stood among various thistles, groundcherry, some other nightshades, staghorn sumac, pepperweed, chickweed, Jimsonweed, lambsquarters, pigweed, etc.

He said, "This is a corn field. It will be planted this week."

But it has long been known that this is the challenge of Pennsylvania agriculture.

The temperate climate, the historic eveness of temperature and moisture, and various geological structures and conditions create a variety of conditions whereby a wide variety of plants can grow and thrive, not to mention agricultural crops.

Whereas, the area may be too humid to achieve one-day dry down of hay for consistent optimum forage quality, it can accomodate a larger variety of plants — including weeds — than many regions of the world.

But weeds aren't the only concern.

Among the insects that plague those with traditional agricultural livestock and vegetable row crops, there are viruses, fungi and bacteria to confront.

The two weeks of rain and overcast weather that recently broke to a high dry pressure system has allowed the resumption of field work.

The weekly report on field activities from the Pennsylvania Agricultural Statistics Service relates to farm activity from the previous week.

This week's report reflects an inability to get into fields. Next week's report will undoubtedly contain mention of haying, seed bed preperation and planting activities.

In the meantime, those with questions about their cropping strategies can contact their local Penn State Extension agronomy agent, purchase a current copy of the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Agronomy Guide, or contact a certified crop consultant.