Chinchbugs now infesting corn, sorghum fields

Chinch bugs are infesting some corn and grain sorghum fields across the state, with the heaviest pressure reported from the Delta parishes in Northeast Louisiana. The chinch bug is a legitimate early-season threat than can reduce stands and stunt plants in both crops. This is especially true when heavy populations infest seedling plants under dry conditions," says Dr. Jack Baldwin, Extension entomologist with the LSU Agricultural Center. He explains that the adult chinch bug is a small insect, about 1/4-inch long, that is mostly black, with white markings on its wings. The immature chinch bug (nymphs) resemble the adults but are somewhat smaller, wingless and reddish in color.

Both the adult and nymphs cause damage by piercing plants with their beaks and sucking out plant juices. Feeding by large numbers of chinch bugs will cause wilting and stunting, and can result in death of young plants. A reddish discoloration will appear at areas of the plant where feeding is intense. Plants that survive the seedling damage will be slow to develop and may not produce as much grain as normal plants.

Baldwin says to scout for chinch bugs by sampling plants at random throughout the field. Field margins should be carefully observed because migratory chinch bugs will infest these areas first before spreading inward. Chinch bugs are usually found around the base of plants, behind the lead sheaths or 'occasionally in whorls of small plants. In hot, dry weather they can also be found beneath the soil surface on plant roots. This is especially true in the heavier soils which tend to be cloddy and cracked under dry conditions.

In corn, Baldwin says that the economic threshold or time to treat the crop is when five or more adult chinch bugs are found on 20 percent of the seedling plants (less than 6 inches tall). In grain sorghum, treatment is needed when only two or more adults are found on 20 percent of the seedling plants (less than 6 inches tall).

He says that corn produces a larger, more vigorous seedling plant than grain sorghum, which accounts for the difference in thresholds. In some instances, larger plants of either crop may require treatment, but this involves a judgment decision based on chinch bug numbers, size of plants, growing conditions and damage symptoms.

Baldwin says that foliar insecticides recommended for chinch bug control include Sevin, Furadan and Lorsban. He says to refer to the Extension Insect Control Guide for the recommended use rates of each product. Make applications using ground equipment only. If possible, use two to three nozzles per row operating at high pressure and high volume (gallons of finished spray per acre).

Corn and grain sorghum fields treated at planting with soil insecticides, such as Counter, Furadan and Lorsban, should have adequate protection from chinch bug damage in the seedling stage. However, these materials may not perform as well because lack of activation if soil conditions are dry.

"Sometimes a good rain will reduce the threat of chinch bug damage, especially if previous soil conditions were rather dry," Baldwin says. "Rainfall will not only promote seedling vigor and growth, but it may also reduce the pest population by entombing chinch bugs beneath the soil surface. Adequate moisture will also help to activate the soil insecticides if one was used at planting."