



IRRIGATED CROPPING FORUM

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OILSEEDS NEWS

LOOK OUT FOR LUCERNE FLEA



Newly-emerged canola crops need monitoring for lucerne flea.

PHOTO COURTESY IK CALDWELL & CO

Canola crops are emerging across the cropping areas of Victoria and parts of southern New South Wales, and growers and agronomists are advised to be on the lookout for the presence of lucerne flea and earthmites, following widespread activity and the possibility of requiring additional sprays.

Advisors believe that this year, lucerne flea numbers are exceptionally high.

Agricultural consultant, Brooke Thompson of Crop Facts in Horsham, described lucerne flea

levels as “shocking this year”.

“They’re far worse than earthmites. They’re everywhere – even volunteer cereals have been totally decimated. We’ve been working really hard to make sure our clients’ crops are protected.”

Lucerne flea make round 'windows' of transparent leaf membranes in the cotyledons and leaves with their rasping mouthparts, and heavy infestations can slow seedling growth or kill young plants. They are only three millimetres long, and spring off the leaves when they are disturbed.

New leaves should be checked for damage to see if lucerne flea is persisting or if the crop is outgrowing the damage, before applying an additional control.

Queensland Department of Primary Industries entomologist, Dr Melina Miles, formerly of Horsham, said that in nearly every case, the long term impact of establishment pests - if they don't cause the seedlings to die - is a slight delay in the time to maturity, and no impact on yield.

"That is the issue here - are the seedlings at risk of being killed?" asked Dr Miles.

Ms Thompson said that many of her clients use a seed dressing, which appears to repel lucerne flea in normal years. However, she said the seed dressing is unable to protect the crop from lucerne flea when the infestation is so heavy, and an additional pesticide may be needed.

Although some growers have applied organophosphate insecticides which control lucerne flea while spraying paddocks with a knockdown or pre-emergent herbicide, they still need to monitor paddocks closely.

"We're having a look, or getting the farmers to have a look for lucerne flea in the canola paddocks that have been sprayed," said Ms Thompson.

Albury-base agricultural consultant, John Sykes, said that although seed dressings have a repellent effect on lucerne flea, they don't seem to be working as well on the pest as previous years.

Mr Sykes thought that this may be either due to the very good spring last year leading to higher than usual numbers of eggs laid, or the dry start to the season.

He also said that growers should be aware that while the majority of synthetic pyrethroid insecticides control earthmites, they don't work on lucerne flea.

He said lucerne flea was causing problems in canola crops with, "all sorts of paddock histories".

Landmark agronomist Greg Toomey, from Epsom, said that lucerne flea activity has been "extensive", especially in paddocks only sprayed with a synthetic pyrethroid.

However, he said that in a canola paddock sown with two lots of seed both treated and untreated, the untreated part of the crop had been attacked by a range of insects, whereas the treated section looked exceptionally good.

Mr Toomey believed the dry conditions were slowing growth rates, making the untreated canola more susceptible to insect attack.

"Normally you don't see such a difference, because there's better growth."

University of Melbourne Research and Extension officer, Dr Paul Umina, has reported that lucerne flea have been found in canola crops in south east New South Wales at present, and in Victoria's northeast, Wimmera, Western District and southern Mallee. Earthmites are also causing damage to emerging canola crops around the Wimmera and Western districts of Victoria.

Dr Umina said that regular monitoring of crops and correct identification of pest species is critical for successful control.

These pests persist in cropping paddocks because they are able to survive long, hot dry summers. The first canola crop after pasture exposes the crop to particularly high levels of insect pressure.
