

Burrus Buzz

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Rootworms in 2015: Will the decrease in rootworm pressure impact 2016?

by Matt Montgomery

The answer to the above question is a definitive yes. The impact upon regional rootworm pressure will be dramatic. University specialists fully expect rootworm pressure within our footprint to be as low as it has ever been. The likelihood of an individual field suffering rootworm injury in 2016 decreased drastically this season.

Is rootworm management a mute issue?

We previously mapped out the reasons why rootworms will be less prevalent throughout the Burrus footprint in 2016. Does that mean we will not see any issues in 2016?

Common sense says this cannot possibly be the case. Nobody can guarantee zero rootworm pressure and nobody can guarantee zero rootworm injury. There are too many qualifiers.

One of those qualifiers comes in the form of varied rainfall. Rainfall totals varied across the Burrus footprint. The I-80 corridor provides dramatic evidence. The eastern portion of that corridor suffered severe crop injury as rainfall transformed fields into swamps. The western portion received rainfall at just the right rate resulting in a beautiful crop. Rootworm suffocation would have been an issue toward Kankakee County, but it was a non-issue in Rock Island County. While much of the Burrus footprint will experience less pressure due to 2015 rainfall, this will not be the case in every region. There will likely be variation even within saturated regions of the Burrus footprint.

The second qualifier relates to the subject of rootworm species. Even though overall rootworm pressure decreased in 2015, beetles were not completely absent. Burrus noticed more Northern corn rootworm beetles this season than we did Western corn rootworm beetles. This gave us pause. We know that Northern corn rootworm beetles, particularly those in the northwest part of our footprint, have occasionally displayed extended diapause (a habit of overwintering eggs for more than one year). We have noted in previous articles that rootworm eggs tend to survive pretty well in saturated soils (mortality increases in cool, wet conditions but it does not completely zero out rootworm eggs). What if some Northern corn rootworm eggs displayed extended diapause and made it through 2015 unscathed? While a remote possibility, it is still a possibility.

These qualifiers keep us from boldly predicting no rootworm pressure in any field in any corner of the Burrus footprint. We can state with confidence that rootworm pressure will be much less likely across the Burrus footprint – but we dare not proclaim that it is a complete non-issue in 2016.

What should be our strategy going forward?

The 2015 growing season was incredibly hard on crops. Despite some positive harvest surprises, nobody wants to see a season like this again. It was gut-wrenching. However, excessive rainfall may have a silver lining associated with it. Excess rainfall might have acted as a rootworm “reset button” in many fields. Our best management efforts could never drag rootworm pressure to 2016 lows. Mother Nature did what our technology was incapable of doing. Think of this year being a magic wand. When it was waved over our fields, it pulled many fields back from the edge of resistance.

It did not eliminate resistance concerns, but it did provide us some resistance breathing space. We may have increased the chances that we can beat this thing.

Burrus has encouraged growers to rotate traits each growing season. If they have been relying on only one trait, we have encouraged them to move away from it. We have encouraged them to use alternative traits in the Burrus lineup. That recommendation is still sound. We know it will help us prolong trait life because “it will keep resistance off its’ game.” Many growers have been hesitant to embrace that recommendation though. “What if I shift to a different trait and it doesn’t work?”

It is always more comfortable to stay with the familiar, especially when you believe the risk is high. We do not believe that risk truly is high, but after this season, growers should realize that the risks associated with trait rotation are lower than ever before. There has never been a better time to try a rotation to new traits.

Burrus can understand why growers might be tempted to move away from rootworm traits in 2016. After all, we have made a good case for why rootworm pressure will decrease dramatically. However, we explained why we cannot guarantee zero rootworm injury in 2016. Where does that leave a grower? If a grower decides to plant non-rootworm traits and if they live in areas historically prone to rootworms, we would encourage growers to still plant a substantial fraction of their acres to rootworm traits. If they happen to stumble into a rootworm prone area, they will at least reduce their overall exposure to rootworm injury. They might just drop some of those rootworm products into more rootworm prone fields.

A closing thought related to rootworm injury. Observations in the Hughes portion of our territory indicate that some fields managed to still suffer rootworm injury this season. While the risk of rootworm pressure will be reduced in the central portion of the Burrus footprint, we do not believe the risk has been equally reduced north of that region. Because margins are more important than ever before, growers should make sure they also tap Burrus’ Force rebate program (a program held in cooperation with Syngenta) and our program with AmVac that provides rebates on insecticides.

