FARMERS ARE ADVISED TO FOLLOW GOOD PRACTICES AN

Armyworms attack crops



ZOMBO

By Richard Drasimaku

John Tokerunga, a farmer in Abaji parish, Jangokoro sub-county, Zombo district got terrified when he saw the devastation caused by armyworms on a demonstration site of Victoria Seeds Limited near Arikpa Primary School.

Tokerunga, who is also the chairman of Pimeri Group that has been growing beans, is in a dilemma because they had just opened a 20-acre field for diversifying into maize production. He wondered whether the deadly caterpillar, previously unseen in Zombo, was associated with the hybrid maize variety.

Lack of awareness

Equally confused was George Kerunega, an agricultural officer at the sub-county, who thought the pests specifically attacked hybrids or originated from the source of the seeds, implying lack of awareness about them infestation.

But after a careful scrutiny, they realised that the worms' effect was more pronounced in the parts of the field that were neither fertilised nor weeded, while in the section where modern farming was practised, the maize plants did well.

"We are going to follow the good practices we have learnt about the demonstration farms because we want to produce maize in bulk," Tokerunga said.

The farmers have now organised demonstration sites to create awareness on this new pest threatening maize production according to Josephine Okot, the managing director of Victoria Seeds.

Some of the good practices include early preparation of gardens and planting of crops plus weed control and timely fertiliser application to give the crops strength to outwit any emerging worms during growth.

BETWEEN THE LINES:

- The worms tend to attack parts of the field that are neither fertilised nor weeded.

The armyworm

The armyworm caterpillars derive their name from the fact that they move in a file of small insect armies and attack whatever plant stands in their way, according to information from Planet Natural Research Centre in US.

Like the adult moth, the armyworms are dormant during the day, often hiding in plants or underneath garden debris, but active at night.

Their lifecycle involves the adult moth arriving under the cover of darkness to lay eggs. Tiny caterpillars hatch in five to 10 days.

The young worm is green in colour, while a full grown larvae is between dull-green to brown, with alternating light and dark strips running the length of its body.

The researchers from the entomology department of the college of agriculture at Purdue University have identified the particular species, whose favourite meal is the leaf whorls and kernels of maize as the larvae of a pale brown moth that has a white dot in the centre of each forewing.

Armyworm control



Dr Kassim Sadik, the director of research at Abi Zonal Agricultural Research Institute in Arua, said the armyworms can be controlled by timing of the planting. In this case, the farmer must prepare the garden in advance and plant at the onset of the rains.

Sadik also encourages crop rotation and advises farmers to remove any volunteer crops from the previous season during gardening and make sure they obtain treated seeds from certified sources.

Sadik said farmers should only consider spraying if the economic damage is severe enough to warrant the cost of insecticides.

Spraying also destroys a farmer's first line of defence against the pests because natural predators such as birds, beneficial insects and other larvae predators may fall victim to the pesticides, thereby giving the subsequent regeneration of caterpillars an edge.

Purdue University research also advises that before spraying, one should inspect the worm for a small white egg-shaped structures, usually behind the head. If found, these are eggs of a parasitic fly and this indicates that the worm will soon stop eating and die, so there is no need to waste pesticide on a sick thing.

REMARKS BY M

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