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NEWS RELEASE: IMMEDIATE

Winter Cutworms Invade Michigan

Just when you thought the season of destructive insect feeding was over a new bug crawls across the horizon. In mid October reports began coming out of Oceana and Lake Counties of Michigan that a worm was feeding on alfalfa hay fields, grass fields and lawns. In two weeks time Michigan State University Extension Agents from over twelve northern Michigan counties had found this insect and the MSU Diagnostic Clinic had it identified as a new pest for Michigan. It is the winter cutworm, *Noctua pronuba*.

Unlike most cutworms that feed on field crops and garden plants in the spring of the year, this one is unique because it feeds mainly in the fall and can even be found crawling around on the snow in early winter, thus its name winter cutworm. This winter appearance surprises many people wondering how insect can survive sub-freezing temperatures. The winter cutworm is one of a many insect that lives in a stage of winter dormancy in the soil surface, with the help of an anti freeze like chemical in their body, allowing it to survive sub-freezing temperatures.

This cutworm is a native of Europe and was first found in Nova Scotia in 1979. The hairless worm-like larvae hatch in late summer and start feeding, enabling them to grow to 2 – 2.5 inches in length by fall. The larvae are usually light to dark brown in color with black dashes down the back. The eggs that are laid by the female moth can produce 300 to 400 larvae, so just a few moths can produce a large number of feeding larvae that fall. Many farms on warm sunny days have witnessed thousands of cutworms feeding in fields. Once they strip the field of green vegetative material they have a habit of moving in mass all in the same

direction to the next field. This crawling mass of larvae, when detected in the fall can cause great concerns for humans. Even non farmers and gardeners may experience their impact as reports of some of the larvae moving from the lawns to inside the household have been reported. These wayward home invaders will do no damage inside, but can be quite a nuisance if more than a few are found.

They have shown a feeding preference this fall for alfalfa, clover, grass, rye, and wheat, but have also been known to feed on squash, cabbage, carrots, lettuce, potatoes, strawberries, tomatoes, sugar beets, and Swiss chard to name a few. We believe this year the feeding damage this late in the growing season does not warrant insecticidal control. But farms will have to watch their fields of alfalfa, wheat, oats, and corn closely next year to prevent possible damage.

The larvae will emerge in April, begin feeding, and pupate to a moth in May or June and then lay eggs again and start the cycle over. It is the spring feeding that we will have to monitor closely. Soil tillage seems to diminish the population but all it will take is an un-tilled field within crawling distance, and the crop in the tilled field could be at risk.

This cutworm seems to be fairly wide spread across much of the Northern Lower Peninsula. Many farms do not even know that they have them yet. As farms begin making seed corn purchases this winter for 2008 they should investigate the benefit of using a genetically improved insect protection trait in their corn seed that is effective for cutworms. As with most insects, it seems the initial invasion of this pest next year, spring and/or fall, could be large. In time, biological controls like disease, and predatory insects, mammals and birds will begin to moderate and control the populations of this pest. Until then farmers and gardeners should be prepared.

Color pictures of the winter cutworm can be found at the Osceola County MSU Extension web site at www.msue.msu.edu/osceola. For more information call the Osceola County MSU Extension office at 231-832-6139.