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Kirkville farmer Jeff Kubecka joins pest patrol, wins IPM award

KIRKVILLE, NY: The first time that Jeff Kubecka risked a field of sweet corn to try a new way of dealing with pests, the numbers kept telling him not to spray. This worried Kubecka, who deals in a business where one wormy ear of corn might have a distributor putting in a call to the competition.

It was 1995, and Jeff Kubecka had just begun using integrated pest management, or IPM, on 200-acre Kubecka Farms, a third-generation family farm in Kirkville, NY, 15 miles east of Syracuse.

Kubecka scouted his fields weekly for pests, then plugged the numbers into a simple chart with two main categories: "Treat" and "Don't Treat."

"We went to harvest on that field and didn't have to spray once," Kubecka recalls. "I couldn't believe it, since these are normally times of heavy pest pressure. But it worked, and that sealed the deal for me." Kubecka harvests about 16,000 bushels of sweet corn each year, along with potatoes, squash, cucumbers, broccoli, peppers, and other vegetables.

Now Kubecka has earned an "Excellence in IPM Award" from the New York State Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Program at Cornell University for his proactive work in adopting and promoting IPM. IPM develops and demonstrates least-risk methods of dealing with insects, weeds, and plant diseases—methods that pose minimal risks, whether to the environment, human health, or economic well being.

Kubecka explains that good IPM can involve methods as different as using pheromone traps and scouting for pests, crop rotation, soil sampling, and cover crops, or setting up an on-farm weather station. The pheromone traps, for example, are baited with the scents—the pheromones—that female moths use to attract males of European corn borer, corn earworm, or other pests. Males that fly into these traps can't get out. Kubecka checks the traps weekly. His catch tells him if it's time to start field scouting. He looks for eggs masses and young larvae, to see if they'll trigger the threshold that says "Treat."

Once worms are in the ear of corn, Kubecka notes, it's too late to do anything. "I haven't found anyone yet who likes wormy corn," he says.

Most years, Kubecka is able to cut pesticide use on sweet corn by 50 to 65 percent over what he would spray if he didn't use IPM practices. He also posts his "trap catch" to an IPM-sponsored "pheromone trap network" that alerts growers across the Northeast as to where the pests are and when it's time to scout their fields.

Kubecka thinks that crop rotation, another method in the IPM toolkit, may be one reason why pest pressure tends to be low on his potato crop. Potatoes have a reputation for requiring heavy applications of pesticides.

"But we're not in a big potato-growing area," Kubecka says. Large areas planted to one crop over many years may build up higher pest populations than relatively small fields rotated from one part of a farm to another every year.

Meanwhile, the farm's weather station told Kubecka that an old rule-of-thumb—apply fungicide when potatoes

begin to flower-often isn't the case. "I found out that leaf wetness and temperature predict whether or not I need to spray," he says. "Only once did it coincide with flowering."

Kubecka's weather station also measures "growing degree days," or "GDDs." Most insects develop more quickly when the weather is warm. So a weather station that calculates the cumulative degrees of warmth all season long helps growers pinpoint when eggs hatch, or larvae get big enough to pose a problem.

"Jeff is an innovative farmer who has worked with me on several demonstration projects and takes full advantage of opportunities to reduce pesticide use," says Abby Seaman, vegetable crops educator with the New York State IPM Program. "As the co-executive secretary of the New York Vegetable Growers, he influences other farmers in adopting IPM practices."

"You can't be spending money for no reason," Kubecka says. "That's what's great about IPM-the research has been done for the economic and environmental value of every decision. When you use IPM, you know that when you make a decision, it's the right one."

Kubecka receives his award on February 13 at the New York State Fruit and Vegetable Expo in Syracuse, NY.

For information about the New York State IPM Program, see <http://www.nysipm.cornell.edu>.

For more about the NYS Fruit and Vegetable Expo, being held Feb. 13-16, see <http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/hort/expo/>

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