

Fresh from the Farm
Sunday, January 2, 2005

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January Talk Will Be Asian Soybean Rust

Happy New Year to everyone. Hopefully, soybean growers will be able to find something to be happy about come harvest time in 2005. The year 2004 ended with reminders of how Mother Nature can ruin not only agriculture crops but people's lives as well based on media coverage of the Tsunamis in the Indian Ocean. Interestingly, it seems agriculture in our part of the world, specifically the state of South Carolina and adjacent states along the Atlantic Ocean, have benefited from many of the hurricanes that have made landfall here. The timely rainfall this past season may have given us record crop yields.

Now look at the negative side of the picture, like the recent ice that displayed such a beautiful site both in the sunshine and on the moonlight nights. It was just as dangerous as it was pretty. Mother Nature has her way, so she sent us Asian Soybean Rust spores with the hurricanes (or at least with one of the four of them). Hurricane Ivan gets the credit as the winds came from South America to the Mississippi River Valley and eventually to South Carolina and at least eight other Southeastern states with the pathogen for this scary disease.

Thankfully so far, what is known about Asian Soybean Rust- a fungus called *Phakopsora pachyrhizi*, this disease must have a live host in order to over-winter in our area of the world, meaning it must be blown in each season to infect our soybean crop. Concern now is it may only have to be blown from south Florida or Louisiana instead of South America or the other side of the Atlantic (meaning again the wind would not have to blow as hard as a hurricane to bring this plague to our state).

Numerous agriculture agencies (Extension services, Pesticide Regulatory agencies, APHIS- Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service, Farm Bureau, and ag industries plus Environmental Protection Agency) are working as a team to help us better prepare and keep awareness out front as we approach the new growing season. There are currently no resistant soybean varieties to the disease, so our only means of defense at present is the wise and timely use of approved fungicides. On December 17th the Chicago Board price of soybeans at the close of trading was \$5.45 per bushel. This same date in 2003 that price was \$7.69 per bushel. It will be difficult for a soybean producer to justify the possibility of having to treat acres of soybeans twice and potentially a third time to keep this rust from progressing, should infestation actually take place in a field. Also take into consideration soybean yields in our area are generally averaging around 20-24 bushels per acre. The last two years have been exceptions with timely rainfall giving us better yields.

Since this appears to be more of a scare tactic that will probably cause some interesting scenarios on the futures market as our 2005 season begins, our concern is some of our farmers may not be taking this serious enough. Those who have never had to borrow many thousands of dollars each year to invest in a business driven by Mother Nature may understand why a farmer could become complacent about this potential problem. After the crop disasters in our area in 2002 that followed the four previous years of extended dry weather and low yields, those still farming could figure by now it couldn't get much worse. If this disease goes unchecked, our soybean industry could be devastated in this state. So, what else is new?

Numerous soybean meetings are in the making across the state that include presenters who will discuss and have dialog with the farming community to make this rust problem more aware, particularly to those who seldom walk into a soybean field during the season. What is a must is that every soybean producer should attempt to attend at least one of these meetings for a better insight into the problem and to see what options will be available for defense. Two meetings are planned on January 11th at Blackville at the Edisto Research & Education Center and January 13th in Florence at the Pee Dee Research & Education Center. The purpose is to get Extension agents, regulatory folks, other cooperating agencies, crop consultants and ag industry on the same page to deal with the identification and prevention or control of Asian Soybean Rust. Other meetings will be planned in January for soybean farmers to attend but any farmer is more than welcome to attend one of the above mentioned meetings if the time is better for you. Both of these meetings begin at 9:00 AM.

In addition to our plant pathologists, ag economists and others will cover as much as possible about what we could be facing in 2005 in the soybean business. Farmers will have to consider scouting or spending more time in soybean fields to look for the infestation. This will not be a good year to be complacent and neglect your soybean fields. A big concern will be with farmers who never treat soybean fields for any reason (namely insects or diseases) due to the low or no return on the investment. Historically, some of these folks may be ahead of their neighbors when it comes to net return on the investment. Should we actually get an infestation of the rust and it go unchecked, the problem could potentially devastate your crop and maybe adjacent fields belonging to your farming neighbor. Watch for more meeting announcements and plan to attend.