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Midge Tolerant Wheat Proves its Value in the Field

NOVEMBER 28, 2011 – This is the second year that midge tolerant wheat has been widely available to growers and results are in. Prairie farmers are pleased.

Dale Wylie grew AC® Shaw VB and AC® Unity VB on his farm near Biggar, Saskatchewan this summer. “The AC® Shaw VB is new,” Wylie says, “but it looks to be a good variety.” Excellent harvest weather helped, Wylie admits. He was able to straight-cut all of his wheat and reports that “neither the Shaw nor the Unity was hard to thrash this year.” The end result? “Yields were above average and the quality was good.”

With midge tolerant technology working for him, Wylie didn’t even consider spraying. “You’re paying for the technology. You might as well use it.” While he did notice a few midge in the area, Wylie wasn’t worried. “I didn’t have to go out with a pie plate checking for midge every night. You trust the technology.”

AC® Goodeve VB was another popular midge tolerant wheat variety grown in 2011, joining AC® Unity VB in the top ten list of Canada Western Red Spring varieties seeded acres across the Prairies. New varieties available for 2012 planting include AC® Shaw VB, CDC Utmost VB and AC® Conquer VB. Visit www.midgetolerantwheat.ca for a full list of seed varieties available.

Lyle Cowell is the manager of Viterra’s agronomic services in Tisdale and Melfort. Cowell says that farmers growing midge tolerant wheat in his area had exceptionally good yields. “They’re good varieties,” he says. “Not just because they’re midge tolerant.” Cowell believes midge tolerant technology relieves a lot of stress for farmers, taking away both the need to check for midge, and the need to spray. “Farmers, by and large, don’t like to spray insecticide.”

Dr. Stephen Fox, an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada wheat breeder, believes the 2011 growing season was a good test for new midge tolerant wheat varieties. “This year will be educational for a lot of people, because there was a fair bit of midge out there.” As well as lowering insecticide costs, midge tolerant wheat can add to farm profits by preventing yield and grade losses that can be caused by midge damage. Fox says, “Midge is an important grading factor in certain areas.”

Midge tolerant wheat varieties are sold as varietal blends (VB). Varieties containing the *Sm1* gene are blended with 10 percent midge susceptible varieties. This creates a refuge for midge that are not virulent (resistant to the *Sm1* gene). As Fox says, “The primary reason for the refuge is to make sure that the non-virulent midge aren’t totally devastated.” If that happens, virulent midge would soon build a population able to thrive in a field seeded with midge tolerant wheat.

Nurturing non-virulent midge in the refuge could extend the life of the *Sm1* gene as long as 90 years. Without the proper use of the refuge, the *Sm1* gene may have a life span of only 10 years. “The concern,” Dr. Fox says, “is we only have one gene. And if the midge adapt to that gene, we’re sunk.” Agronomist Lyle Cowell understands the measures that must be taken to protect the gene, including the need for farmers to limit the use of farm-saved seed to one generation past Certified Seed. “The rules have been very fair,” he says. “Farmers are quite satisfied.”

This article has been brought to you by the Midge Tolerant Wheat Stewardship Team, a broad industry coalition representing plant breeders, government, seed growers, seed distributors and producer groups.

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