

Idaho late blight outbreak now widespread

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

RUPERT, Idaho — High humidity and continued afternoon thunderstorms have enabled late blight to proliferate in potato fields across a swath of southeast Idaho encompassing eight counties, according to potato researcher Jeff Miller.

Miller, with Rupert-based Miller Research, is now advising growers in Minidoka, Power, Bonneville, Bingham, Cassia, Madison, Fremont and Jefferson counties to spray fungicides weekly — or every five days if storms roll in and threaten to further spread the spore load.

Typically, Idaho's hot and dry conditions keep late blight in check.

Miller has encouraged one grower with severe infection to kill vines early to limit the spore load. In most cases, however, he's found light infections of the devastating fungal disease are scattered throughout fields and haven't spread in clusters, thanks to rigorous fungicide programs.

But the even distribution of lesions — brown patches often surrounded by light-green halos — has prevented growers from controlling the spread by killing vines in isolated areas.

"As of now, it doesn't look like the blight is to the point of devastation, but you can find lesions almost anywhere you go in fields," Miller said, adding it's become the worst

Idaho late blight outbreak he's witnessed since 1998.

In central Minidoka County, where his own research fields are, he's mapped late blight covering 15 miles from north to south and 10 miles from east to west.

Minidoka County crop advisor Gordon Harper has also increased his growers' fungicide programs to weekly, compared with every 14 days in a normal year, using more costly but effective products, and cutting into their already tight profit margins.

"This is the worst I've seen it as far as widespread and fairly easy to find, and as big of a coverage as I've seen it," Harper said.

All late blight samples in the state have tested as U.S. 23, the same strain found in the Blackfoot area after heavy August rains last season. Miller suspects the current Eastern Idaho outbreak marks the first time the disease has overwintered in Idaho volunteers, though Magic Valley's infections apparently originated from another source.

The good news, Miller said, is that U.S. 23, unlike other strains, is sensitive to the systemic fungicide metalaxyl — though he warns the chemical works in living tissue and would be a poor choice for senescing plants. Miller has found late blight has been much slower to infect fields in which metalaxyl was applied earlier in the season to control other diseases, such as pink rot.

Hoping to ensure an adequate chemical supply, Syngenta officials have obtained Idaho emergency labels for Ridomil, which contains metalaxyl, and Revis as standalone fungicides in potatoes.

Power County grower Nate Schroeder, whose crop had late blight last year, has sprayed a special gas in empty storages to rid them of residual spores and plans to treat spuds with phosphorous acid as they head into storage. He also plans to acid-kill vines to limit chances of spores contaminating tubers at harvest.

Though Schroeder has seen no evidence of late blight in his fields this season, he's operating under the assumption that it's present. He's sticking with a biweekly spraying program, however.

"We're pretty sure it's out there because it's everywhere," he said.



John O'Connell/Capital Press
Jeff Miller, with Miller Research in Rupert, Idaho, finds a potato plant with a brown lesion surrounded by a green halo — a symptom of late blight. Late blight has become extremely widespread in Magic Valley and Eastern Idaho potato fields due to a continuous string of storms supporting and relocating spores.

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