Most vegetable growers know that corn earworm (also known as tomato fruitworm) is more of a late season pest. This is because they only overwinter in low numbers this far north. We usually have a small first generation about this time of year and a larger second generation in August, which is supplemented by moths migrating from the South on storm fronts. In most years, the migrant moths far outnumber the locally produced moths.

One of the additional consequences of the storms that have caused so many flooding problems here in the Midwest this year is that the storm fronts have also brought up large numbers of corn earworm moths. I put my corn earworm pheromone trap up on Monday, June 9 and by Wednesday, June 11 I had 178 moths in the trap. In most years, we would catch just a couple of moths at most at this time of year. Generally, we consider 10 moths per night to be the threshold at which we would treat sweet corn that was silking at the time, so the numbers that we caught are historically high and potentially very damaging. Fortunately, it appears that the catches in most of the traps are starting to go down.

I was fortunate enough to receive grant funds from the North Central IPM Center to purchase a number of corn earworm pheromone traps that I have begun to scatter around the state. Cooperators who are checking the traps are sending me their counts on a daily basis (more or less). The counts that I receive are posted on a web site at <http://extension.entm.purdue.edu/cornearworm/index.php>. There are some blank columns where I am hoping to have more traps located in the near future. Moths have been caught in fairly high to very high numbers in most areas of the state. The one exception is at the Pinney Purdue Farm near Wanatah. Kentucky, Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota have reported similarly large moth catches.

This flight of moths has the potential for causing some serious losses to vegetable crops. One sweet corn grower in northern Indiana reported that his very early sweet corn, targeted at the lucrative July 4th market, is already 50% infested with small corn earworms. Other early planted sweet corn is also at risk. For management details, see E-31 at <http://extension.entm.purdue.edu/publications/E-31.pdf>. For those growers with early season sweet corn, I suggest we abandon our usual 10 moths per night threshold and treat sweet corn with green silks if we are catching any moths in the closest trap. This is because a field of silking sweet corn is by far the most attractive site in the area for earworm moths to lay eggs on.

In addition, other plants are also at risk. Earworms will also feed on tomato, cabbage, beans, melons, squash, pepper, many other vegetables, alfalfa, clover, soybeans, grapes, small fruits, peaches, pears, plums, roses, snapdragons, zinnias and other flowers. Homeowners, in particular, may report damage on plants we don’t often see earworms feeding on. Many of the general purpose insecticides available to homeowners, particularly the pyrethroids, should provide good control. Please let me know if you receive reports of unusual earworm damage or if you have additional questions.