Fall Weed Control an Ever More Popular Option

by Bruce Erickson

Winter annual weeds are becoming more common in Midwest corn and soybean fields, as farmers have moved increasingly to no-till systems and post-only herbicide programs. And increasingly farmers are responding by getting a jump on their weed management with fall herbicide applications.

You may be undecided about fall treatments, but Purdue Extension Weed Specialist Bill Johnson offers some help. “If your spring weed growth in a field has been bad enough in recent years that you’ve had to till in the spring to dry things out, and if you are hoping to no-till that field next year, a fall herbicide treatment is a good option.” Another specific consideration is dandelions, which have been a growing problem in many fields, and are much easier to control with fall treatments. “I encourage fall applications to growers that are seeing increasing dandelion pressure.”

Last fall Aaron Swinford and his dad Sam applied herbicides to about 500 acres following harvest on their fields near Flat Rock, Indiana, and this fall they plan to treat even more acres, working around their harvesting demands, and when fall weather and soil conditions permit. “On ground going to corn, we have had good luck with a simazine (Princep) and 2,4-D mix.”

It is generally not a good idea to plant into a weedy seedbed, and while burndown herbicides in the Spring are always a viable option, there are also some good reasons why it might be good to begin to tackle those weeds in the fall:

- a thick mat of weeds can slow drying of the soil, delaying planting
- extra weed growth in high residue situations can influence planter operation and seed placement
- winter annual and perennial weeds can serve as alternate hosts for Soybean Cyst Nematode and insect pests
- most winter annual and perennial weeds are easier to control in the fall than in spring after a long, cold winter
- you may be able to forego a burndown application in the Spring

Swinford provides another consideration: “We are strictly no-till, and by and large my landlords appreciate my soil conservation efforts, but I can imagine some of them must think twice when they see those fields occasionally green up with winter annuals. So you might say, along with the other benefits, that our fall applications provide some reassurance for my landlords as well.”

Fall herbicide applications used to be to mainly for the control of tough perennials like bindweeds, Canada thistle and hemp dogbane, and some growers in more northern areas have applied residual herbicides in the fall not so much for winter annuals, but to save precious spring time and get a jump on their weed management with fall herbicide applications.
on their regular weed control programs. But no-till systems are causing many new weeds to appear, especially south of I-80.

"Winter annual weeds have become more an object of concern because we've had some mild winters in recent years. This makes it easier for winter annuals to survive. So in the spring we wind up with a fairly good mat of chickweed, henbit and purple deadnettle when we get ready to plant." said Johnson, a speaker at last summer's workshop.

Another winter annual causing problems is cress leaf groundsel, commonly known as butterweed. The bright yellow weed (pictured previous page) spreads rapidly and can slow a field's ability to dry in the spring. Fall-applied herbicides are more effective in controlling cress leaf groundsel than burndown applications, Johnson said. "In the fall, cress leaf groundsel is a rosette," he said. "In the rosette stage it is far more susceptible to herbicides."

Fall herbicide programs aren't for everyone. Said Johnson, "One thing to keep in mind is that a lot of your fall-applied systems will not control giant ragweed in the spring. Even with a residual there's a good possibility that the residual activity will not be present at the time that giant ragweed starts to germinate. And often, if you use a product that does not have any residual activity, you're still going to get germination of lambsquarter and chickweed and so forth." Those making late applications should also be mindful of the potential of cold temperatures that can affect sprayer operation.

Fortunately, there is still plenty of time to make these applications, with weed specialists recommending treatments through early December or until the ground freezes (consult a crop adviser for recommendations specific for your region and situation).

For More Information

Fall Applied Herbicide for Corn and Soybean, Purdue University: 
http://www.btny.purdue.edu/weedscience/2006/FallApplied06.pdf

Managing winter annual weeds and dandelion in corn and soybeans with fall herbicide applications, Ohio State:  http://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/weedworkshop/winterannualwebfact.pdf

Winter Annual Weed Species picture guide, University of Illinois:  
http://weeds.cropsci.uiuc.edu/images/Winter%20Annual%20Weed%20Species/index.htm

Winter Annual Weeds and SCN, Purdue:  
http://www.btny.purdue.edu/weedscience/SCN/winterweeds.htm