Canola virus wipes out crops in South Australia

ABC Rural  By Lauren Waldhuter

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PHOTO: Farmers in parts of South Australia have concerns about the damage being caused to canola crops by Beet Western Yellows disease. (Clint Jasper)

Scientists say an outbreak of beet western yellows virus is one of the worst cases ever seen in Australia.

Early estimates suggest up to 10,000 hectares of canola have been affected, in South Australia's lower north, mid north and lower mallee regions.

The virus is transported by green peach aphids, which have thrived in the state's recent warm and humid weather.

Ag consultant Mick Faulkner says agronomists felt like they'd been "blind-sided" after not being able to work out what had been affecting crops.

"It took everyone a fair bit of time to realise that we weren't killing the aphids," Mr Faulkner said.

"Green paddocks are now brown.

"Those that have been affected, I have grave fears that they won't yield anything at all."

Virus halted for now

The South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) says it's now testing samples to confirm how the virus is spreading and where else it might turn up.

Pulse pathologist Jenny Davidson says with cooler weather, the virus-transmitting aphids aren't moving and at the moment the best thing growers can do is "nothing",

PHOTO: Alawoona farmer Andrew Biele suspects these aphids (now dead) have infected his canola with Beet Western Yellows Virus. (Clint Jasper)

AUDIO: Canola virus devastates crops (ABC Rural)

MAP: Riverton 5412
"We expect that the spread of this virus would've stopped for now, so there's no point people going out and spraying aphids now," she says.

"It's also important growers ascertain it actually is the virus causing problems in their canola crops, there may be other things going on as well.

"The potential risk is what these aphids will do in spring time.

"We're not sure whether or not pulse crops are at risk but we'll have that information back well and truly before the spring time flights."

Ms Davidson says the virus isn't uncommon, but what is unusual is the extent of damage and infection being seen.

She says it's taken everyone by surprise.

"I've never seen this level of damage from any virus in crops," Ms Davidson says.

"It's the magnitude of what we're dealing with that is totally un-expected."

PHOTO: The canola plant on the bottom picture has been attacked by aphids, and farmer Andrew Biele believes they're now infected with Beet Western Yellows Virus. (Clint Jasper)

Insecticide resistance a factor

Scientists are also concerned with the level of pesticide resistance the green peach aphids have developed.

SARDI entomologist Greg Baker says it's definitely had an impact.

"We now know in some populations there is high level resistance to pirimor and to various synthetic pyrethroids," he says.

"There's also a low to moderate resistance to organophosphates.

"So their possible failure when used early may have allowed the aphids to go on an spread further virus.

"We definitely need to be on a close watch when we come out the other side of winter."

Topics: grain, pest-management, riverton-5412

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