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Efforts to combat small but ‘ravenous’ worm ramp up

The nation’s top scientists and biosecurity experts have joined forces with growers around the country to fight one of the nation’s newest and most prolific pests.

Fall armyworm larvae can be less than half a centimetre in size with an appetite for more than 350 plant species. Since it was first spotted on mainland Australia in January last year, the pest has travelled to every state except South Australia.

The nation’s horticulture research and development corporation, [Hort Innovation](#), is delivering a suite of targeted defence measures against the pest. Research to identify natural predators, deliver rapid diagnostic tools, and education measures are just some of the projects in the RDC’s armory.

Hort Innovation General Manager of Research and Development Dr Alison Anderson said the pest has caused significant damage in parts of the country where some sweetcorn growers have lost entire crops.

“Fall armyworm moves fast. It’s good at developing resistance to insecticides, and it’s ravenous — it completely devours crops,” Dr Anderson said. “The pest was only recently detected in Australia early last year and immediately affected grain crops. We’re working with growers and the nation’s leading researchers to give the horticulture industry the tools it needs to help manage this prolific pest.”

Funded through Hort Innovation, projects are being delivered with the expertise of researchers around the country. Led by Queensland’s Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), Agriculture Victoria and the Cotton Research and Development Corporation (CDRC), this work is already seeing results.

Dr Anderson said one of the research projects has provided early insights into the Bowen area of Queensland: “We’ve seen that fall armyworm has spread beyond sweetcorn in northern Australia and into other horticultural crops, such as capsicum, leaving between 10 to 30 per cent loss of saleable product for some growers there.

“Collaboration with growers has been critical. They have provided access to their properties and have shared information on growing practices and many photos with the researchers, and this really helps us understand fall armyworm more.”

Initiatives include a fall armyworm podcast series [available online now \(CDRC\)](#), the development of a rapid field-based test for fall armyworm (Agriculture Victoria); the identification of potential fall armyworm predators and the risk to Australian horticulture (DAF), and the development of extension programs to effectively fight fall armyworm (DAF).

DAF senior entomologist Siva Subramaniam said, “Hort Innovation’s investment has made possible a national research and development effort into fall armyworm, including horticultural crop risk analysis and crop surveys to identify parasitoids and predators.

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