

Warm and Wet Spring Fuels Pest Pressures in Texas, June 6-12

A warm, wet spring has created near-ideal conditions for several damaging insects across parts of Texas, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert. David Kerns, Ph.D., AgriLife Extension statewide integrated pest management coordinator, professor and associate department head for the Texas A&M Department of Entomology, said pest outbreaks were primarily impacting producers managing pastures, rice, corn and cotton. “I’d say the biggest issue we’re facing currently is with the pasture mealybug,” Kerns said. “It’s really taken off in the last month. It has skyrocketed as an issue.”

Unlike many pasture pests that cause temporary damage, the pasture mealybug can kill grasses outright, a serious blow for producers whose livestock depend on Bermuda hay, Bahia grass and native rangeland bluestems for forage. The pest thrives in hot, wet weather and thus far has been detected throughout South Texas, along the Gulf Coast, Central Texas and as far west as Gillespie County. Drier conditions to the west may naturally limit further spread, Kerns said. Treatment options remain limited. No currently labeled pasture insecticides have proven effective, though researchers are evaluating candidates, Kerns said. Producers in affected areas should monitor closely and contact their local AgriLife Extension office if they suspect an infestation, he said.

In Southeast Texas’ rice country, Kerns expects rice delphacid populations to build and move into fields by mid-June. The sucking insect can kill plants or result in reduced grain weights. Fortunately, Texas has recently received an emergency Section 18 label for Courier SC insecticide. This insecticide is an insect growth regulator and will be active primarily on the nymphs. “You don’t want them to get ahead of you,” he said. “It really is going to take close monitoring to make that insecticide more valuable.” Corn producers face two concerns. The corn leafhopper, which vectors damaging plant pathogens, remains confined to South Texas for now. But North Texas and Panhandle fields could be reached as populations move northward. “We are recommending protecting corn from corn leafhoppers through R1,” Kerns said. Corn leaf aphid is a second worry as a recent outbreak in Central Texas often signals trouble further north, and Panhandle producers should begin scouting before their corn tassels, Kerns said. The most critical period for corn leaf aphids is from just before tassel through R1. Producers should treat during this period when 10-20% of the plants have 100 or more aphids.

Texas cotton producers have one positive development to report. The two-spot cotton leafhopper, or cotton jassid, which can devastate cotton by injecting toxic saliva, has been detected only in nurseries where it is infecting hibiscus and not in commercial cotton fields so far this year. “We haven’t detected any in our cotton to date, and that’s really good news,”

Kerns said. Producers should continue scouting and report any unusual leaf yellowing or reddening to their AgriLife Extension county agent, Kerns added.



Pasture mealybug damage is visible on Bermuda grass in Southeast Texas. The pest has been detected throughout South Texas, along the Gulf Coast, Central Texas and as far west as Gillespie County. (Hannah Harrison/Texas A&M AgriLife)

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Forest Thinning, June 13-19

Driving north on highway 6 from Hempstead looks remarkably different than it did 150 years ago. No, I am not talking about the cars zooming past at 85mph but the forest structure. Just the other day I had an individual comment on how dense the forest is in parts of Waller County and that was one of the reasons they decided to move to Waller County. Yes, I agree the forest, specifically the Post Oak woods in the northern third of Waller County are a gorgeous natural sight, but, historically, the Post Oak woods in Waller County looked drastically different and would have been a savannah appropriately named Post Oak Savannah. In a Post Oak Savannah, Post Oaks and other hardwood trees are more spaced out allowing for sunlight to reach the forest floor encouraging herbaceous growth (grass and forbs). These savannahs would have been dependent on wildfires to keep woody undergrowth to a minimal.

Prescribed fire has been growing in popularity in the past couple of decades amongst foresters, conservationists, biologists, landowners, and hunters as a cost-effective tool for forest thinning and promoting the many benefits of a more open forest. Prescribed fire is not the only tool available to thin your forest. Another popular option is to use commercial-grade forestry equipment and on smaller tracts of land skid steers. Application of chemical herbicides is also an option. Rather if you use prescribed fire, mechanical equipment, or chemical herbicides the main goal is to reap the benefits of a more open forest.

Forest thinning and clearing of woody understory reduces the amount of fuel load and will make your property more resilient to wildfires. Not only are wildfires a risk to property and life, but wildfires also tend to burn hotter than prescribed fires causing impacts to forestry and wildlife resources on your property. An open forest is resilient to wildfires because the herbaceous understory and open canopy prevent wildfires from reaching the crown of trees. Crown fires are harder to control and will cause damage to your valuable oak and trees.

From an ecological benefit, Post Oak Savannah supports plant and animal communities that are now rare not only in Waller County but across Texas. For example, protected species such as Houston Toad and Navasota Ladies' Tresses are directly tied to Post Oak Savannah habitat. Additionally, the open herbaceous understory provides food sources and nesting cover for bobwhite quail and turkey which was once common but now absent from much of the Post Oak Savannah in Texas. Lastly, plant communities associated with Post Oak Savannah habitat are home to rare wildflowers and grasses that support an assortment of pollinators.

From a timber perspective, if you are in the far northeastern part of Waller County and have a commercial pine stand, thinning produces a more valuable product for the lumber mill. Stand thinning as rule of thumb should occur 12-15 years after the initial planting. Thinning will decrease competition, allowing the remaining trees to grow straighter producing a more

valuable product. Also, stands that are not thinned are more susceptible to disease and insect outbreaks.

Maybe one of the most important benefits from forest thinning and woody understory control is aesthetics and preserving for future generations. Many landowners feel that the aesthetics value of a pine savannah and preserving for future generations justifies the increased cost and management required.



Yaupon is an abundant understory plant in the Post Oak Savannah. In the absence of fire or brush management techniques yaupon can grow into an impenetrable understory causing negative effects to wildlife habitat and increasing the chance of dangerous wildfires.

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Praying Mantis Facts: Friend or Foe in the garden? June 20-26

Praying mantids, commonly referred to as praying mantis, may look harmless, but they're aggressive predators that eat a wide range of prey — from garden pests to pollinators. With triangular heads, swiveling eyes and front legs held up as if in prayer, praying mantis are among the most recognizable insects in gardens and landscapes. Their appearance often sparks curiosity — and misconceptions. Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service senior program specialist and entomologist in the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Department of Entomology, explains some common myths and surprising behaviors. Praying mantis or praying mantid: What's the difference? One common point of confusion is the name itself. Brown explained that the correct general term is praying mantid, which refers to any insect in the order *Mantodea*. Praying mantis refers to a smaller group of insects within the order. "All mantises are mantids, but not all mantids are mantises," she said. "Praying mantis actually refers to a specific genus, while mantid includes all of them."

Why do they look like they're praying? There is nothing holy about a mantid's folded stance — what resembles prayer is in fact a coiled weapon, held in patient, deadly stillness. Their forelegs are armed with sharp spines and strike with lightning speed, snatching and securing prey in a vice-like grip. "People hear 'praying mantis' and might think of something calm or even spiritual," Brown said. "But that 'praying' posture is just how they hold their raptorial front legs that are designed for snatching and subduing prey quickly."

Are praying mantids good for gardens? Sometimes. People often consider praying mantids to be beneficial insects that provide natural pest control. That's because they eat common garden pests like caterpillars, grasshoppers, flies and leafhoppers. However, Brown said they are generalist predators, meaning they'll eat anything they can overpower. That includes beneficial insects such as bees and butterflies. "They'll eat pests, but they'll also eat beneficial insects and pollinators, and even other mantids," she said. "Food is food."

Can mantids eat animals bigger than themselves? Texas is home to several native mantid species like the Carolina mantis. It also has larger, non-native species such as Chinese and Mediterranean mantids. Those larger species can sometimes capture prey people may not expect — including hummingbirds, lizards and even small mammals. "It doesn't happen all the time, but it can," Brown said. "If there's a mantid sitting on a hummingbird feeder, you might want to move it away from the feeder."

Do females eat their mates? One of the most common mantid myths is that females always eat their mates. While it does happen, Brown said it's far less common in the wild than

people think. “A lot of those observations come from lab settings where males don’t have anywhere to escape,” she said. “In nature, males are much more cautious.”

Can mantids camouflage themselves? Mantids also have surprising survival adaptations. For example, they can change color slightly between molts. This color change helps them to better match their surroundings and avoid being seen by predators like birds, spiders and lizards. “They may look like top predators, but they’re part of a much bigger food web,” Brown said.

Ultimately, Brown said mantids should spark curiosity rather than concern. “They’re fascinating insects,” she said. “The more people understand them, the more they appreciate the role insects play in our environment.”



Praying mantids are a distinctive predatory insect. Their forelegs are powerful, spiny tools the ambush predator uses to catch and subdue their prey. (Wizzie Brown/Texas A&M AgriLife)

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From Local to International, Agriculture Faces Multiple Issues, June 27 – July 3

I recently had to write a report over issues facing agriculture. This report was centered around one question. Discuss one issue that is currently impacting agriculture at the local, state, and international level? The hard part of this question was not finding issues, but picking just one issue at each level that I felt was the most important. I wanted to share with you today my answer to the above question as I believe these are important issues for everyone rather you are directly involved in agriculture or just enjoy eating food.

Local: Pasture Mealybug is a new invasive pest of pasture and hay fields along the mid to upper coast regions of Texas. Numerous reports started to occur in the Spring of 2025, but it is now believed this pest may have been in Texas since 2021 or 2022. The pest can now be found as far north as Franklin, TX and has been found in Louisiana in sugar cane. The pest has become a major issue in Southeast Texas and the coastal bend where it has decimated fields, especially finer stemmed Bermuda like Tifton. To make matters worse the bug is very cryptic and from my experience most producers don't see damage till months after the infestation occurred. The bug damages the plant through sucking mouth parts that release toxins that eventually kill the plant. Symptoms look like drought stress or extreme stand decline to where whole fields have died. Currently there are limited management options other than to scout, avoid high nitrogen applications, and avoid pyrethroid insecticides. Currently no insecticides are available, though research is occurring.

State: Changes in working lands across Texas from large operations to smaller hobby farms or recreational properties. While Texas is gaining approximately 1,000 new farms and ranches a year, the tract size is getting smaller exponentially as the average farm and ranch is now less than 100 acres in size. Landowners' goals have also changed, the top 3 reasons for owning land are family recreation, hunting, and wildlife enjoyment. Around a third of Texas landowners have less than 10 years of experience owning land and many live off land in urban cores. Texas agriculture is changing as working lands get smaller, landowners goals change, and landowners' skill level decreases.

International: Climate change has always been a hot button topic. While people tend to argue until they turn blue in the face for the causes of climate change, the impacts to agriculture are becoming hard to ignore. Climate change will affect agriculture worldwide by affecting yields, locations where crops can be grown, viability of certain crops, food supply chains, and famine in developing countries. Producers will need to adapt to challenges brought by climate change to ensure their operations remain profitable and governments will need to recognize these challenges to ensure food security worldwide. I am briefly going to review

examples of how increasing temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and increasing levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere will affect agriculture. Increasing temperatures will have an impact on fruit production that requires chill hours like peaches. Peaches require a certain number of chill hours during the winter to set fruit in the spring. In Georgia warmer winters are causing required chill hours not to be reached in peach production is being hampered. On the flip side warmer winters may support a growing citrus industry in Georgia. Changes in temperature are also affecting wildlife, which is important for hunting, wildlife tourism, and animal agriculture. In northeast U.S. and southern Canada moose populations are moving further North, decreasing hunting revenue to some local cities. While southern States like Texas are seeing more tropical birds regularly attracting birders from around the world. Changing wildlife populations will affect animal agriculture in temperate regions around the world. As tropical wildlife species expand into temperate regions, they can be vectors for tropical diseases that can impact animal agriculture. Changing precipitation patterns will affect staple crops such as corn, soybean, and wheat. Some studies expect in the next 50 years corn yields will be reduced by 5%-15% in important corn growing regions such as the U.S. Midwest, Central America, and Sub Sahara Africa. Increasing levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere benefits woody vegetation over warm season grasses. While all plants utilize CO₂, woody vegetation is better equipped to utilize increased levels of CO₂ than warm season grasses due to different photosynthesis pathways. It is believed this is one reason for the increase of woody vegetation in grassland ecosystems as woody plants can outcompete warm season grasses. Increased woody vegetation impacts the productivity and stocking rate of grazing lands along with altering water availability and wildlife habitat.



Texas farmers and ranchers are feeling the squeeze from multiple issues including new pests, loss of working lands, and changes in weather patterns.

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