Identifying and Managing Southern Rust of Corn

- Southern corn rust is a fungal disease that generally affects corn later in the season after silking.
- Weather conditions can significantly affect how southern rust develops and how far and quickly the disease spreads.
- Yield loss can be severe, especially in late-planted corn. Under certain conditions a timely applied fungicide may help reduce corn damage.

Life Cycle
Southern rust is caused by the fungus *Puccinia polysora* and generally occurs in tropical to sub-tropic areas. Under favorable conditions, the disease can thrive in more temperate regions. The pathogen overwinters in southern Florida, the Caribbean, and Mexico and is transported north each year by winds and storms. Like common rust, southern rust requires a live host to survive. Disease occurrence is dependent upon wind dispersal of the pathogen, thus infection one year does not indicate that southern rust will occur the following year.

Favorable Conditions
Disease development is favored by high humidity and temperatures between 80° to 90° F. Under favorable conditions, new infections are visible in about 10 to 14 days. Epidemics may occur when unusual weather patterns lead to mass air movements from the tropics where southern rust is endemic.

Symptoms of Southern Rust
Pustules develop primarily on the upper surface of leaves and only sparsely on the lower leaf surface (Figure 1). Pustules are circular to oval in shape and light orange in color. These pustules erupt and expose small, dust-like spores, which are dispersed by wind. Unlike common rust, pustules may also develop on ear husks, and leaf sheath tissue surrounding the stalk (Table 1).

Effect on Yield Potential
Southern rust has the potential to cause yield loss due to its ability to develop and spread rapidly. The effect of disease on corn plant health and yield depends on time of infection. Plants infected early in the season may develop significant damage on leaf tissue. Heavy infections of southern rust can lead to early senescence and can limit the ability of the plant to produce carbohydrates for grain fill. This leads to stalk cannibalization and may predispose the plant to stalk lodging, stalk rots, and reduced grain quality.

If southern rust is identified, growers in the region should first focus their scouting efforts on irrigated and late-planted fields. Irrigated fields are more likely to have the high humidity required by southern rust to infect corn. Late-planted fields are at risk for developing more severe infections of southern rust because young leaves are more susceptible than older leaves. When scouting for southern rust, determine the growth stage and yield potential to help evaluate whether or not fungicide applications are an economically feasible option.

- Southern rust is favored by temperatures between 80° to 90° F.
- Pustules may develop on the leaves, ear husks and leaf sheath tissue surrounding the stalk.
- Pustules are found mainly on the upper leaf surface.
Management Options

Resistant corn products are the most cost-effective means to manage southern rust in field corn.

Chemical control may be warranted if the weather forecast is for hot, wet, and humid conditions, pustules are present, and black layer is four or more weeks away. However, consider the following before applying a fungicide:

- Corn that is within two weeks from physiological maturity (black layer) may not benefit from a fungicide treatment.
- Fungicide treatment for corn with estimated yield potential of less than 150 bushels per acre may not provide a profitable return.
- Spraying may result in greater yield potential and economic gain if more than 10% of the leaf area is damaged.

Fungicide control is preventative rather than curative. Fungicides cannot restore the health of infected leaf tissues, but they can prevent new tissues from becoming infected. Thus, applications must be made before southern rust develops to severe levels.

Please consult with your local agronomist if you have concerns about southern rust in your fields, and review university recommendations for fungicide application timing.

Sources:

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Table 1. Differences between southern rust and common rust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Southern Rust</th>
<th>Common Rust</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Rapid and more destructive</td>
<td>Slow and less destructive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of pustules</td>
<td>Mostly on upper leaf surface</td>
<td>On upper and lower leaf surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fungus</td>
<td><em>Puccinia polysora</em></td>
<td><em>Puccinia sorghi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable conditions</td>
<td>80° to 90° F and high humidity</td>
<td>60° to 77° F and RH ≥ 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pustules (lesions)</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Densely clustered</td>
<td>Sparsely scattered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circular to oval shape</td>
<td>Elongated shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Light orange in color</td>
<td>Brick red in color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image1" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image2" /></td>
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</tbody>
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For additional agronomic information, please contact your local seed representative.

Individual results may vary, and performance may vary from location to location and from year to year. This result may not be an indicator of results you may obtain as local growing, soil and weather conditions may vary. Growers should evaluate data from multiple locations and years whenever possible.

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