• Cool temperatures slow down both plant growth and insect feeding
• Insects will rebound faster than the crop if temperatures warm without benefit of sunshine.
• Soil insects rarely drown, especially in cooler temperatures.

Throughout the weekend of wet, cool conditions, with forecasts of more to come, one may wonder what effect this has on insect pests and their damage to field crops. This question was raised by some inquisitive crop consultants monitoring alfalfa fields approaching treatment levels for weevil feeding just as the inclement weather set-in. Needless to say, there will be no hay cutting or spraying for days to come.

As a (general) rule of thumb, insects are relatively inactive at temperatures below 50ºF. The good news is that as an insect’s metabolism is reduced so does its development and feeding. So these unseasonably low temperatures may have reduced the amount of early insect damage to our crops. The bad news is that the insects are not going to go away and the crops continue to grow slowly. With lack of sunshine, crops cannot “outgrow” insect feeding.

Although rain remains in the forecast for the next several days, temperatures should be trending upward. Insect feeding will resume as temperatures rise. This period of warmer temperatures, yet lacking in sunlight, will increase the time that below and above ground insects may come in contact with a slow-growing seedlings. Normally minor leaf and/or root feeding could become lethal as damaged plants continue to lag behind in development.

Drowning of below ground insects requires the total absence of air in the soil. Even saturated soils contain small amount of oxygen. Coupled with the fact that cool temperatures already reduce the insect’s metabolism, grubs, wireworms, etc., it doesn’t take much soil pore space for these insects to survive.

Insect epizootics (beneficial diseases) are not likely to occur at this time of the year. Typically temperatures in the 80’s coupled with high humidity are necessary to promote and spread these naturally occurring soil pathogens. It will likely be mid-July by the time we experience those conditions.

With the plethora of above and below ground insects desiring to feed on field crops this time of year, we strongly recommend strapping on the boots and walking these recently planted and seedling crops for stand losses. When this weather finally breaks, fields should be prioritized for insect and/or weed control and replanting where necessary. Happy scouting!