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**MSU EXPLORES WAYS  
TO FIGHT ASIAN SOYBEAN RUST  
ON ORGANIC CROPS**

EAST LANSING, Mich. -- Asian soybean rust, an invasive fungal disease that attacks soybean plants and reduces their yield, has devastated South American crops and is moving into the southern United States. Fungicidal sprays are available to combat rust on conventional crops, but no strategies have been found to control the spread of rust on organic soybeans.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is awarding a \$480,000 two-year grant to a team of researchers and Extension staff members from Michigan State University (MSU) and three other institutions to examine strategies for controlling soybean rust on organic soybean crops.

Since 2002, the USDA has been working toward strategies to combat soybean rust. The agency predicts \$7.2 billion in losses if soybean rust spreads throughout the United States.

MSU, along with Iowa State University, the University of Florida and the Rodale Institute in Kutztown, Pa., are working to develop a biological method to control the spread of soybean rust on organic crops. The MSU work will be conducted at the Kellogg Biological Station (KBS), a part of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station network.

“Rust can be controlled with synthetic fungicides, but organic farmers cannot use these products. This grant is looking at biological pesticides that can be used by organic farmers,” says Dale Mutch, MSU Extension specialist at KBS.

Rust was discovered in the continental United States in November 2004. It has been found in several southern states.

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“Organic soybeans are the money-making crop for organic farmers in Michigan -- that is why we need to be proactive in addressing this potential pest problem,” Mutch says. “Right now we’re going to test what biofungicides are currently available. If something new comes up, we’ll test that, also.”

Rust has the potential to cause crop losses of 80 percent or more. Severity of losses depends on the susceptibility of the soybean variety, the time during the growing season when rust attacks plants (rust spreads under warm, wet conditions) and the weather conditions during the growing season.

In South America, yield differences were as high as 50 percent between fields that were sprayed with fungicide and those that weren’t. South American growers spent \$750 million controlling the rust during the 2003 growing season.

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