

Gophers Eat Into Ag Profits

By Dennis Hinkamp

Alfalfa is the most important cash crop grown in Utah, bringing in more than \$160 million annually. Profits could be higher, but Utah State University Extension Wildlife specialist Terry Messmer estimates that gophers are eating into the profits at a rate of about \$3.5 million per year.

"Pocket gopher infestations in alfalfa fields not only reduce the quantity of hay harvested, but the mounds created by their burrows cause equipment damage," Messmer says.

Based on a survey of Utah alfalfa growers by USU and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, growers reported losses of nearly 5 million dollars due to damage caused to their fields by wildlife. Nearly 70 percent of the survey respondents reported the pocket gophers were a primary cause of this damage, Messmer says.

He found that, of those farms and ranches reporting damage, only 42 percent were actively trying to manage their losses through some type of control techniques. The most frequently used technique was poisoning. Less than 20 percent of operators had ever used pocket gopher traps.

"Using traps to control pocket gopher invasions of newly established alfalfa fields may be a more effective control measure than the use of poisons. A preventative pocket gopher long-term management program that employs an aggressive trapping strategy may actually extend the life of an alfalfa field while reducing damages," Messmer says.

"Although trapping is usually more dependable, many landowners have opted to use poisons, because trapping has been perceived as too time consuming," he says. "In reality, an aggressive trapping program initiated early and applied seasonally may be a more cost-effective means of controlling pocket gophers over the long-term. Most trapping can be done in conjunction with regular field inspection activities."

He says there are several efficient gopher traps on the market. Some common names include Macabee, Victor and Easy-Set. These traps are readily available at local farm, ranch, and hardware stores. Buying in bulk you can further reduce your per trap costs.

Pocket gophers may be trapped anytime throughout the year, he explains. However, it is easier to trap them during the periods they are most active, typically in the fall and spring. During these periods, pocket gophers are actively expanding their borrow systems. This activity is usually evidenced by the presence of new soil mounds. The presence of new soil mounds on the surface of a field is also a good sign to begin trapping.

Placing Traps Effectively

1. Locate the newest mound in the area.

2. Probe to locate the main runway. The best probe to use is a metal rod 3/8 or 1/2 inch in diameter that is at least 1 yard long. Examine the new mound to find the plug where the gopher has filled up the lateral tunnel. This plug will appear as a horseshoe-shaped depression not bigger than 3 inches in diameter. The main runway will be about 15-18 inches away from the mound on the same side as the depression. Now probe the soil in this area. Push the probe into the soil at repeated locations until you find a spot that the soil gives way. The sudden release of the probe may indicate you have found a runway.
3. Using a spade, dig down until you locate the runway. Remove the soil from the runway in both directions.
4. Attach a piece of wire to two traps and fasten the wire to a stake that is driven into the ground. This stake will serve to anchor the traps and assist you in relocating the set. The anchor is necessary to prevent a trapped pocket gopher from pulling the trap into the borrow.
5. Set and place two traps, one in each direction. The trigger must be placed away from the excavation in the direction of the tunnel. Place the traps well into the tunnel being careful not to spring them while placing them.
6. Open burrows attract gophers and they will be caught while trying to plug the opening. This is why it is essential to place the traps as far into the tunnel as you can. This will reduce the chance the gopher will spring the trap with any soil it may be moving to plug the opening.
7. Check your traps daily. If you have not caught your gopher within 48 hours remove the traps and reset them at another fresh mound.

By practicing a preventative trapping program that is designed to deal with the first signs of a pocket gopher invasion you may be well on your way to reducing long term losses in your alfalfa fields, Messmer says. A proactive trapping program used in conjunction with your regular crop monitoring activities could save you hundreds of thousands of dollars. Each pocket gopher removed can translate into several hundred dollars of saved production.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 9 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/09-98/DF)