Leatherjacket damage a real risk to turf this spring – report

DowElanco’s Pestwatch service has detected a rise in leatherjacket populations across the country this spring. Attributed to poor weather conditions this time last year, the rise means that populations are currently exceeding the traditional threshold for treatment in rough grassland.

“This indicates that there will be a particular threat to fine turf this year,” says Talei Herbert of DowElanco’s Specialty business.

“The high quality of grass required to make up cricket or football pitches and golf fairways and greens could really suffer visually from this level of leatherjacket attack.”

Leatherjackets feed on grass stems just below the soil surface taking out tillers and even the plant’s central shoot. The pest will leave bare patches of soil in its wake if large populations are left unchecked.

In the Midlands and North West, average pest numbers are exceeding the threshold for treatment in grassland. And in the South and South East, soil sampling is recording average populations of 2 million larvae/ha – the highest level of activity found in this part of the UK for more than five years.

“Last year, despite the existence of high pest populations, only a small percentage of grass in the UK was treated to prevent damage,” explained Miss Herbert.

“This is mainly because bad weather during the spring of ‘96 slowed pest activity down. Low temperatures force the larvae to remain further below the soil surface, making damage much more difficult to recognise.”

According to Miss Herbert, higher populations of adults survived to lay eggs last autumn. This was compounded by the fact that weather conditions over the autumn favoured successful adult flight and egg laying. A warm, dry period was followed a few weeks later by moist conditions which, in turn, suited larval development and survival.

“This spring there is a real risk of turf damage,” warns Miss Herbert. “Areas at risk should be treated with Lorsban T at a rate of 1.5 litres/ha. This will arrest damage and help to reduce the risk of damage for the following season.”