

Challenging times for OSR?

“ Winter OSR seems certain to remain popular wherever it can be grown with sufficient reliability. ”

Technical Oilseed rape

The arable landscape in which oilseed rape sits has shifted on many UK farms, but growers remain committed to the crop, according to a recent *CPM* survey carried out with BASF and Dekalb.

By Rob Jones

Despite last season's disappointing performance, growing flea beetle problems in the absence of neonicotinoids and an increasing level of spring cropping to counter the blackgrass threat, winter oilseed rape is set to retain a major place in most arable rotations for the foreseeable future.

However, this seems certain to be at a lower level than the recent past for many. At the same time, the axis of UK production may well shift northwards and westwards as growers beyond the crop's traditional heartlands make the most of what appear to be clear performance advantages under today's conditions.

This is the overall picture painted by a timely national study of winter OSR attitudes and intentions undertaken by *CPM* with Dekalb and BASF this spring.

The study involved 230 growers from 46 UK counties, together managing an arable area of well over 100,000ha with an average of 97ha of winter OSR apiece currently in the ground.

While the overall average OSR area has

remained remarkably similar over the past three years, almost a third of producers have reduced their OSR growing noticeably in this time with two in every 10 increasing it.

Very much in line with other national estimates, yields over the past three harvests have averaged 3.67t/ha, falling from an average of 3.89t/ha in 2015 to just 3.29t/ha last harvest.

Highest yields

At 3.87t/ha, growers in the North and Scotland achieved the highest three-year average yields, followed by those in the South West and West Midlands (3.83t/ha) with central and southern growers recording the lowest average at just 3.32t/ha.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given recent production difficulties, markedly more growers than average in the Central and South, East and East Midlands and East Anglia have reduced their OSR areas in recent years.

In clear contrast, in the South West and West Midlands and North and Scotland the number of growers increasing their OSR area over the past three years substantially exceeds the number decreasing it (see chart on p30).

The \$64,000 question, though, is what will happen in the future? Well, while the vast majority of growers (93%) say they're sticking with the crop, a minority intend to stop growing it altogether — almost all of these from the central and eastern counties.

Including those planning to stop growing OSR, just under 60% are likely to reduce their future area of the crop, with just over 40% intending to maintain or increase it. Again, the main focus of this reduction is set



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to be in the central and eastern counties.

On average, growers are looking to include OSR in their rotations once in every four or five years, with sizeable minorities planning rotations of one in three years or less and one in six years or more (see chart on p30).

Interestingly, the number of growers still planning relatively tight OSR rotations exceeds the number looking to rather longer rotations, and these are by no means all confined to western and northern areas.

“OSR plantings have fallen substantially over the past five years from over 700,000ha to around 550,000ha currently and could well fall back again in the immediate future if growers over-react to last autumn's particularly poor establishment in some areas,” suggests study co-ordinator, Deryn Gilbey of Dekalb.

“Ironically, this is at a time when the market prospects for UK rapeseed look relatively rosy. There continues to be strong European demand for both rapeseed oil and meal. And because Europe remains far from self-sufficient in vegetable oil production, ▶

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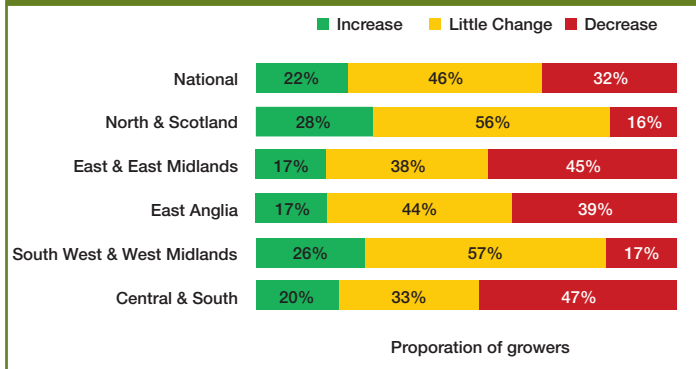
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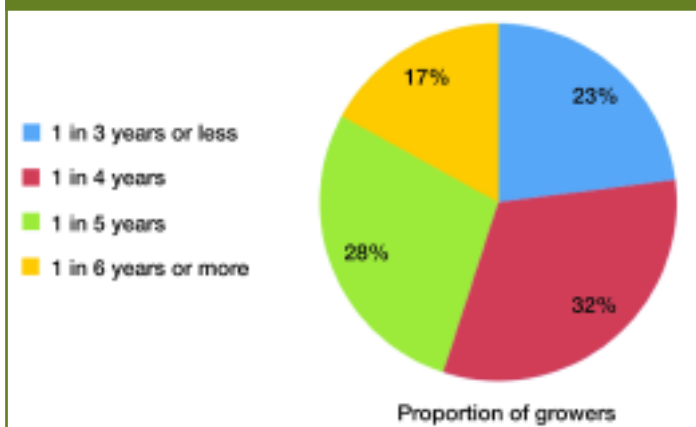
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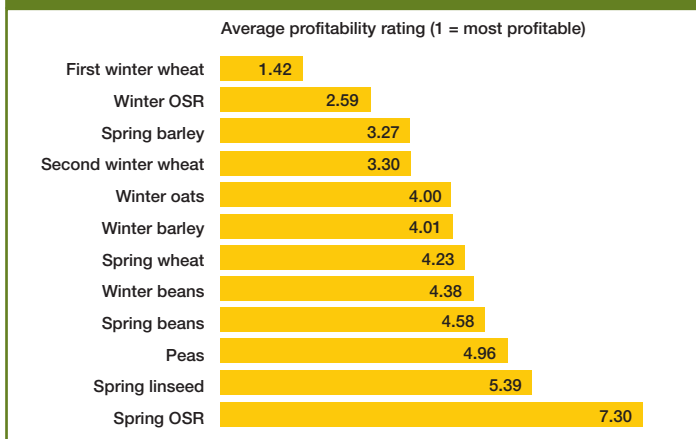
OSR growing changes 2014/15 - 2016/17



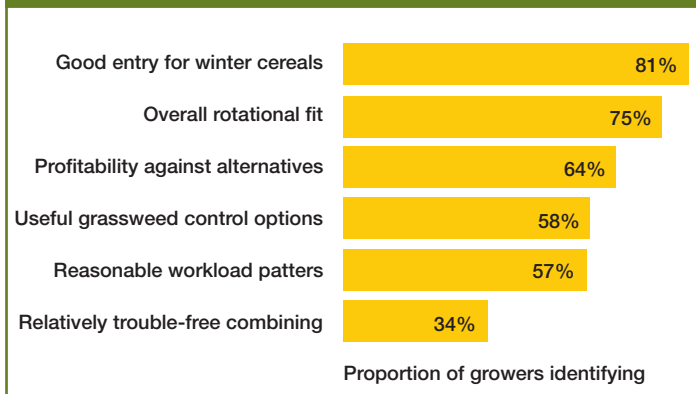
Planned OSR rotational frequency



Relative crop profitability



Main reasons for continuing to grow winter OSR



OSR is less vulnerable to world market fluctuations than feed grains. At the same time, it offers valuable opportunities to replace imports of palm oil with healthier and more environmentally sound home production.

"Of course, changes in the value of sterling will be important in determining future UK prices. But these will impact commodity markets to the same extent, and have little or no effect on the relative position of rapeseed against alternative crops.

"In this context, it's timely to have confirmation from our study that winter OSR continues to remain second only in profitability to first wheat for UK growers, maintaining its clear advantage

over all alternative cereal breaks with the possible exception of winter oats (see chart on left).

"Under these circumstances, winter OSR seems certain to remain popular wherever it can be grown with sufficient reliability," Deryn Gilbey observes.

"With their clear performance advantages, growers in the West and North look better placed than most to take advantage of opportunities in the UK market resulting from issues with the crop in other parts of the country. Particularly so with the even more resilient, yield-protected varieties coming from our leading European breeding programme and OSR's other clear farm management advantages."

The Clearfield advantage

OSR has had its challenges in recent seasons, but when the three 'clinchers' — establishment, weed control and yield — can be secured, many growers still clearly see it as one of the best break crops for their rotations, according to Dave Marris from BASF.

"I think it's for these reasons that we've seen such an upsurge in Clearfield OSR plantings," he explains. "They more than doubled to 30,000ha last season and are set for substantial further growth in the coming year.

"The latest study suggests this is because Clearfield delivers reliability, profitability and a degree of enhanced flexibility for those who may have been questioning the crop. Clearfield is no longer a niche option, grown to control difficult cruciferous weeds, but is viewed as an easier, more practical way of growing a reliable high yielding OSR crop (see chart opposite)."

The fact that growers each identify an average of between two and three advantages of the system, with almost half seeing three or more, clearly underlines this wider appreciation of its value.

Additional reasons for the system's growing popularity, in David Marris' opinion, are the leading Clearfield varieties' strong

performance in independent trials and the more rapid start they appear to make than many non-CL alternatives.

"The most widely grown variety by far in the study was DK Imperial CL which has a notably rapid autumn growth habit," he reveals. "Aided by the lack of hindrance from any ALS residues in the soil from late-applied herbicides in preceding wheat crops, this is a real benefit. We're also researching whether the early vigour they demonstrate allows such CL varieties to cope better with the challenges of cabbage stem flea beetle.

"In more 'weedy' sites Clearfield OSR has had a dramatic impact on yields because this is where its herbicide tolerance excels. Applying recommended post-emergence herbicides such as Cleravo (imazamox+ quinmerac) and Clerando (imazamox+ metazachlor) really knocks back the headache weeds — most notably charlock, hedge mustard and runch.

"There's also a suggestion from the grain trade that dealing with these weeds as well as any possible HEAR volunteers eliminates a source of erucic acid contamination," David Marris adds.

Apart from relative profitability, foremost among the benefits of winter OSR identified in the current study by growers sticking with the crop are the good entry it provides for winter cereals; its overall rotational fit; the useful grassweed control opportunities it offers; and the reasonable workload patterns it involves (see chart bottom left).

Alongside this, insect, slug and pigeon pressures and unreliable crop performance — almost certainly due, in part, to these pressures — were the main reasons cited for reducing their OSR growing by those intending to do so.

The extent to which establishment difficulties are influencing attitudes to the crop is underlined by the most important winter OSR management challenges identified in the study (see chart below).

Not only is achieving reliable establishment identified by nearly three quarters of growers, the only other challenges reported by more than half — controlling insect pests, pigeons and

slugs — all relate to crop establishment. As, indeed, do both the other most important challenges — containing input costs and controlling weeds — in great part.

“Establishment has long been the number one challenge with winter OSR,” says BASF agronomy manager, Clare Tucker. “While the neonicotinoid ban hasn’t helped matters here, slugs, pigeons and weeds — not to mention dry autumns — play as much of a part in limiting the crop’s potential for most.

“So, the best early agronomy has to be our main management imperative. After all, crops that establish rapidly and robustly are far better placed to withstand flea beetles, slugs and pigeons. They’re also better able to tolerate early phoma infections, compete with weeds and survive difficult winter conditions.”

As well as vigorously establishing varieties with the ability to grow away from pests far more effectively than those taking longer to get going in the autumn, Clare Tucker sees the right seedbed conditions and the

early removal of weeds as key priorities.

“Soil conditions are always more important than calendar date in drill timing,” she stresses. “Good straw management, small soil crumb size and effective consolidation are the three most important essentials to ensure the good seed-to-soil contact and adequate moisture supply OSR needs throughout the germination period.

Greatest defence

“Flea beetle is a threat throughout the drilling period — the greatest defence the grower has is to sow in conditions when the crop can get away as quickly as possible and so more able to tolerate adult damage. These crops will develop into strong plants more able to tolerate the later larval burden.

“In my experience, increasing the sowing rate to combat early pest attack is seldom advisable. If flea beetle, slug or pigeon populations are sufficient to compromise a crop, they’ll do so regardless of the number of plants. So, increasing the seed rate dramatically will merely produce weak individuals with poor rooting, increase disease problems and may even compromise subsequent canopy management.

“Removing weeds early on allows crops to become more competitive for the most sustained weed control as well as the greatest



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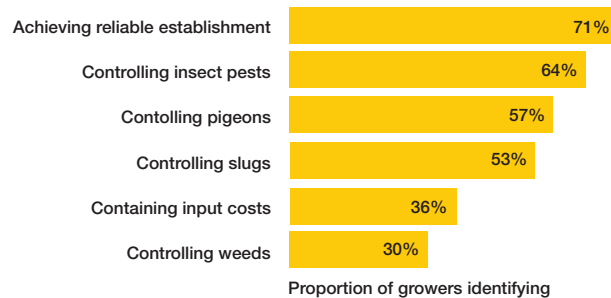
establishment effectiveness,” adds Clare Tucker.

“For those who want to avoid the need for herbicide use until their crops are safely established but still remove weeds early enough to protect yield, the Clearfield system provides an ideal solution. All the more so now the best CL varieties combine highly competitive gross outputs with excellent all-round agronomic packages.

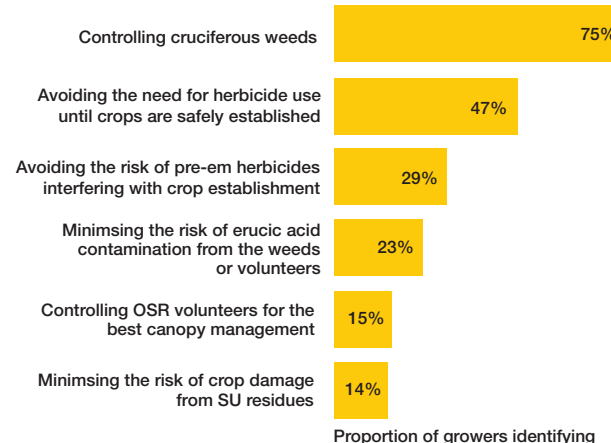
“Under these circumstances, it’s not surprising the system is bucking the trend of declining OSR growing, with the area grown more than doubling to over 30,000ha in the past year alone and Clearfield standing out as the most popular specialist OSR in our study (see panel opposite).”

For more on effective OSR establishment and early management, see the Precision OSR supplement, included with this month’s issue. ■

Current OSR management challenges



Main advantages of Clearfield OSR



Survey response brings a high flyer

Congratulations to farm manager Mark Turner from Skirlaugh in East Yorks, who’s the lucky winner of a state-of-the-art DJI Mavic pro drone for taking part in the CPM/BASF/Dekalb survey.

He responded to the survey and completed the tie-breaker question with the reply deemed best by the judging panel. “Excellent establishment along with excellent agronomic properties makes an excellent

variety,” was his winning answer to the tiebreaker question “What, for you, makes a favourite OSR variety?” He’ll receive his prize from Monsanto and BASF at Cereals 2017.

The aim of the survey was to gather views on oilseed rape and where growers see it in the rotation. To take part in the next survey, make sure we have the correct details for you by emailing angus@cpm-magazine.co.uk