



Recommended refinement

AHDB

*from theory
to field*

From quick wins to longer-term adjustments, change is coming for the Recommended Lists for cereals and oilseeds. CPM delves into results from a recent large-scale public review to understand what this could mean for levy payers.

By Janine Adamson

Change can be uncomfortable, however, in the words of Sir Winston Churchill: “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.”

In pursuit of perfection, the AHDB Recommended Lists regularly go through a public review, and the results of the latest are just emerging. Embracing change may be a tricky feat in its own right, yet more than 900 people contributed their thoughts on the recent review — an activity which by its nature, will instigate change.

Head of crop health and IPM, Jenna Watts, says because the RL scored 4.2/5.0 for importance during the recent Shape the Future industry consultation, the AHDB Cereals and Oilseeds sector council prioritised its review to ensure the variety trialling project remains relevant.

Important data

“RL reviews explore many aspects, from the type and nature of the trials to the way data is analysed. The results help AHDB to direct investment to make sure the RL delivers the most important variety data to the industry,” she says.

“Most people responded via a questionnaire, with around three-quarters of participants being farmers. Online focus groups also took place, as well as detailed stakeholder interviews.”

The RL project runs in phases, typically lasting five years, with the recent review scrutinising its current iteration. Although data analysis continues, initial results are starting to be revealed alongside corresponding potential outcomes.

“Key messages are emerging from the first stage of the review process, ranging

“ Those who took part overwhelmingly agreed that the RL remains valued and continues to be used. ”

from top-line themes to more granular detail. Encouragingly, the first point to share is that those who took part overwhelmingly agreed that the RL remains valued and continues to



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be used alongside personal experience on farm,” says Jenna.

“Respondents mostly indicated that there’s a strong demand for new varieties, and 80% said the number of varieties on the RL is right. But although happy with the size of the RL, which has previously been questioned by some, the focus groups revealed a desire to further understand how varieties enter and exit the list.”

Resistance scores

According to Jenna, one reason for wanting to know more about list entry and exit is pest and disease resistance — questioning why certain varieties remain on the RL despite offering lower scores. “There are specific criteria for pest and disease resistance, which the crop committees continue to adhere to when considering varieties,” she explains. “However, annual discussions take place as to whether those criteria should be adjusted, meaning there could soon be implications for what makes it onto and off the RL as soon as 2023/24.

“This curiosity also confirms the importance of those pest and disease ratings, which is a continual theme throughout the review data.”

It’s important to note that this isn’t a new finding. During the last major RL review, which took place between 2017 and 2019, most respondents rated disease resistance and untreated yield as very important or crucial when selecting a variety. The latest results show this remains the case.

Given this hasn’t gone away, what could prove a quick-win solution, suggests Jenna, is improving the presentation of the RL tables, which should be a relatively easy fix. “At the moment, pest and disease scores are further down the tables, despite being of high importance to growers.

“We know the information which growers find most useful, so reordering the tables to make these features more prominent is a small, but impactful change. We’re polling different table formats with levy payers at events this summer to find out which is the preferred layout,” she says.

The reason behind this continued shift in priorities remains the same — crop protection product revocations and pesticide resistance issues mean interest in what a variety offers is growing, from the seed up. This, coupled with volatile input prices and availability, plus a desire to operate more sustainably, means the pressure is on the RL to provide additional data.

Jenna explains offering information

about how a variety performs within different systems, specifically with lower fungicide and nutrient inputs, is one of the most desired changes to the RL. “This is a much longer-term project involving evidence gathering, analysing historical data and assessing comparable international RLs.

“The complication is understanding what constitutes a ‘typical’ current-day fungicide programme. Currently the RL has trials at two clear ends of the spectrum — belt-and-braces to show the genetic potential of a variety, and fungicide untreated. But what would be a realistic mid-point? It’s a muddy area,” she says.

Other requested new attributes to the RL include the introduction of scores for vigour, consistency of performance and resilience. Jenna warns that, again, ►



According to Jenna Watts, existing RL data could be reassessed to achieve indicators for attributes such as consistency and resilience.

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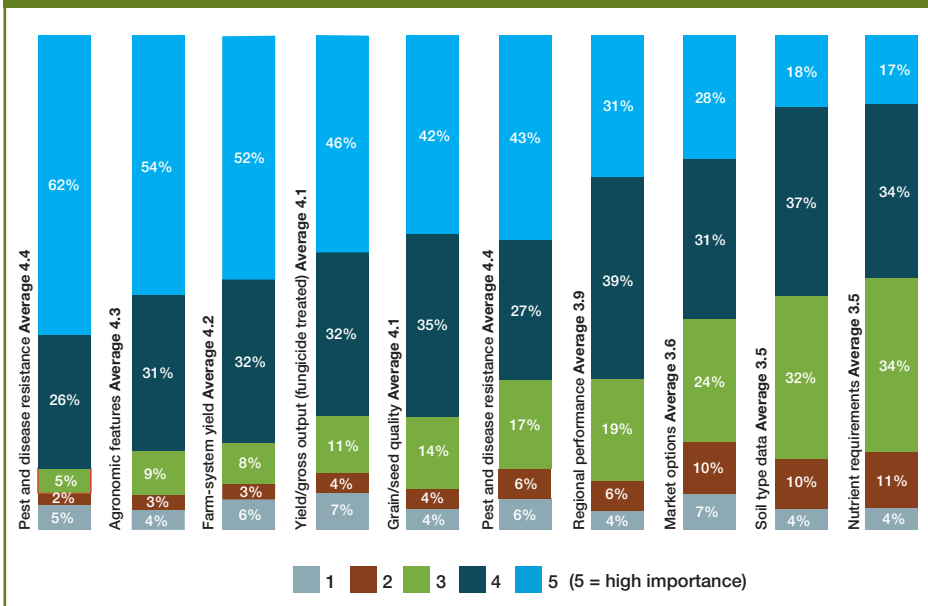
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Source: AHDB RL review autumn 2022

▶ providing new information isn't an overnight job, in fact, it would take around two to three years to gather enough results to claim a robust data set if further trials are required.

"We're already investigating vigour, which came up in the previous review, but the work is still in progress due to environmental influences and genetic variables. Unfortunately, there's a time lag and investment will have to continue to ensure this work lives on," she says.

"As for consistency and resilience, admittedly there's the opportunity to reassess existing data and cut it in a different way to achieve indicators for these attributes. I think there's more we could do without instigating more trials, it just involves some heavy statistical crunching."

Analysis of the review has highlighted other areas which could be addressed through working existing AHDB data

Being realistic – both sides of the coin



Patrick Stephenson says taking photographs of seedbeds during RL trials could help to answer some of the questions raised by growers in the review.

Providing a more realistic representation of current farming practices rather than extremes is something the RL has to embrace, believes Yorkshire agronomist, Patrick Stephenson.

Patrick, chairman of the RL review steering group, believes changing the RL's trial protocols to reflect fungicide programmes used in higher disease pressure areas would be welcomed. "Keeping disease low is very hard these days, but equally, regimes that involve spending around £240/ha, such as those for the current RL trial protocols, just aren't realistic.

"AHDB plans to consult industry for their opinions to provide a rounded view on the matter. Hopefully, if the system can apply protocols which reflect robust on-farm programmes in areas such as Cornwall or Ireland, it will be a positive step."

According to Patrick, levy payers will also have to accept that some elements are too difficult to capture in a small plot scenario. "Many growers use multiple establishment techniques across their farms, so have said they'd like the RL to provide this type of data.

"Being realistic, it's unlikely the AHDB will be able to do this within current constraints. However, so far the trials team hasn't been taking pictorial evidence of plot seedbeds. Taking photographs could help growers to visualise the set-up and would answer some of the questions they have without increasing the burden or spend," he says.

Fife farmer David Bell is a fellow RL review steering group member. He agrees with the sentiment that more could be done with the information AHDB currently has available. "It's already possible to drill down to a regional and then local level using RL data. It's not used by every grower but it's there, it just has to be sought out so that's an accessibility issue."

David believes the purpose of the RL is to empower growers to make their own decisions without being led astray. "We can't tell people what to grow, that's not the AHDB's role. However, all information should be easily accessible to support individual decision making and I see no reason why this couldn't be improved. After all, it's what growers pay for."

Improvements include Jenna's suggestion of integrating weather data, recalibrating digital tools such as the app, and encouraging levy payers to be more creative with the RL data at their fingertips. Otherwise, he warns, the cost to



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implement the desired changes highlighted in the review could be astronomical.

"As a mixed farmer, I adjust my chosen varieties depending on many variables, from establishment method to soil organic matter levels. To replicate something similar through an RL trial across all of the varieties on the candidate list isn't feasible," says David.

"We all have different requirements so it would all come at a cost. The amount of recommendations implemented from the review depends on the outcome of discussions with the industry about levy rates this autumn."

One wish from David, which he believes would be well received, is for improved useability of the AHDB website. "We have to make it work better for growers to help them to navigate the wealth of information available."

harder, or by bringing it closer to levy payers' attention. In some cases, further information is collected, but it just isn't being translated through to growers.

This is the case for trial sites — an area for exploration is the possibility of linking RL and weather data sets, which could provide further insight into climatic factors such as rainfall and soil temperature.

"Again, this came through during the review, a request to understand how varieties perform within different climates. Using what's already available to us from local weather stations is a good starting point which we can then build on," she says. "In fact, we could make it easier to find information on RL trials full stop, including soil type which is available as part of the harvest results."

Task in progress

Jenna believes improving the transparency of work associated with the RL projects remains a task in progress, and that accessibility appears to be a barrier. "Some of the information requested during the review is already available but deeper within the website. There is also clear interest in AHDB communicating development work, such as the investigation into the vigour attribute.

"We should also reconsider the functionality of our digital offers — the Variety Selection tool and RL smartphone app."

Despite the RL being a much-loved system overall, the corresponding Variety Selection tool is something that hasn't seen much uptake among growers or agronomists, despite there being demand

to personalise RL information to specific requirements.

"Unfortunately the digital Variety Selection tool hasn't taken off. We'd like to understand why this is and if we can improve it with a view to a future re-launch. Compared with the website or paper versions, it should be simple and intuitive to use," she says.

"Of course, given this will take investment, the AHDB will have to be confident in that exercise being a good use of levy payers' money," concludes Jenna.

Results of the review continue to be scrutinised by the AHDB Cereals and Oilseeds sector council and RL Board. It's hoped firmer details regarding upcoming changes, including a timeframe for delivery, will be released this winter. In



AHDB wants to understand why the digital Variety Selection tool hasn't taken off despite the overall popularity of the RL.

the meantime, the RL summer edition has been released and is available on the AHDB website. ■

Research roundup

From Theory to Field is part of AHDB's delivery of knowledge exchange on grower-funded research projects. *CPM* would like to thank AHDB for its support and in providing privileged access to staff and others involved in helping put these articles together.

For further info:

AHDB Project P2110377: AHDB Recommended Lists for cereals and oilseeds (2021-26) is led by a consortium, including AHDB, British Society of Plant Breeders (BSPB), Maltsters' Association of Great Britain (MAGB) and UK Flour Millers (UKFM). AHDB sector cost: £9,457,000; total project value: £23,404,000.

For more detail about the project, visit <https://ahdb.org.uk/rl-project>

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