talkingtaties

by Andrew Wilson

Short-term profit-driven thinking from large corporations is nothing new

What a month September has been. It started here with an Indian summer that allowed us to get the wheat straw baled, cover crop drilling finished and some land work done, and ended in a stop start showery frustration.

We finally finished combining on 10 September in spring oats that replaced failed oilseed rape back in April. They yielded a very acceptable 5.4t/ha of milling quality oats (sold for £195/t) and a decent amount of straw which was eventually baled on 28 September. The spring barley cut the day before the oats did much better than it looked at 6.24t/ha, but the joy wasn't to last. Sold forward for malting at £223/t, it broke the record for high N here at 2.03%, so became feed at £168/t — then got a £2 claim for poor bushel weight (it looked fine to me!).

Winter barley tends to follow wheat on our lighter land and was ploughed and pressed in dry conditions in early September, took the rain well and was drilled a fortnight later. Heavy land stubbles cultivated with our 6m vibroflex were rolled to encourage a chit and are in good fettle to strip till wheat as mother nature allows in the next week or so.

Potatoes are now nearly all flailed and sprayed, with just two fields left to do once maturity allows the floater level to drop a little more. Ever since the demise of diquat we have found the flail followed by a dose of Carfentrazone applied in 300 litres of water on a sunny afternoon has worked very well for us. My concern is always stolon detachment, but it isn't generally a problem. Lifting is due to start imminently, and yield digs to press look promising, we should comfortably make contract tonnage this year, all being well between now and delivery next spring.

The frustration of the moment is sugar beet. Good old British Sugar have cheekily tried to jump the negotiation gun by writing to growers directly with a mildly insulting minimum price offer of £37.50/t, which in my opinion falls significantly short of where the risks and challenge of growing the crop dictate it needs to be. In my part of the world north of the Humber, with our IPM measures of cover crops, pollinator strips and nurse crops, virus yellows are seldom a problem — indeed, over half of my 2023 crop was sown without neonicitinoid dressing with no detriment. Neither beet moth nor cercospora seems to trouble us too much either. This means that their 'Yield Protection Product' is practically worthless — our ten-year average beet delivery is comfortably over 100%, with only three years in that time under 100%, the worst being 78% in 2020/21 — suffice to say with a maximum payout covering the gap between deliveries and 80%, and a premium to pay, I will decline.

The early delivery bonus recently announced does little to boost growers' fortunes in my opinion. Had it started in the last week of September and tailed off into October, yields would be better, the bonus would be worth more per hectare, the factories wouldn't be scrabbling for beet and hauliers would be up to capacity before November. It might, just might help Newark Factory close before April too, without necessarily costing our monopoly customer any more than late delivery does currently.

What is particularly frustrating is the cut-off date for the frost insurance of 30 January. Perhaps not a worry to the southernmost growers, but to north Norfolk and Yorkshire growers, we can see some significant frosts well into March. When the factory closed in early February, the frost insurance was aligned, but as things stand currently, the risk of frosted beet and/or sugar deterioration in clamp is solely in the court of the grower. Surely an adjustment here would deliver far more value to both parties than any increase in cost?

Short-term profit-driven thinking from large corporations is nothing new. Farming is and always will be a far longer-term business than any factory process or corporate executives' viewpoint could possibly muster. Not very long ago, beet was barely 20 quid a ton. The sugar market was in the doldrums and essentially the grower base stuck with our customer, with promises of sharing benefits when the market picked up. Now is the time, British Sugar, to stick to your word and share the gold. A sugar beet factory can not operate without a beet supply. Profitable growers are loyal, positive and invest for the greater good, but our patience and tolerance will not last forever.

Anyway, I have a taty grader to grease up and a store inspection to complete, best be on wit job.

Here's to a decent back end to harvest root crops, wherever you are.

Andrew Wilson is a fourth-generation tenant of the Castle Howard Estate in North Yorkshire.

He has a strategic approach to direct drilling on his varied soil types and grows a wide variety of crops. He's passionate about the potato industry and having been utilising cover crops to reduce cultivation and chemical use since 2011, dipped his toe in the water of regenerative potatoes in 2021.

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