



smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith

Wet back-ends - the new norm?

One throw away personal insult I've heard batted around the farming scene goes along the lines of 'if he just stayed in bed all day then he'd be a millionaire.'

The intended slight being that the more active said hapless farmer, then the more money that was lost. God forbid anyone should ever make

such a derogatory observation about me.

The cruel fact is, given the increasingly challenging weather of autumn 2023 and the current prices of most combinable crops, if I had spent more of my days lying in bed filling in SFI forms, it would undoubtedly be a more lucrative use of my time.

Trying to keep things in context, it should be remembered that the much feared 'wet back-end' is nothing new to UK arable farmers. I remember my dad could be as anxious about wet weather in the autumn as he was during harvest. I should add that I was never entirely convinced by the bar room tales he and his drinking buddies told of combining on Christmas Day in the 1950s.

Either way, it does seem that rained-off drilling programmes are becoming the norm, whereas in the past they were the exception. Whether this is climate change at large, I'm not sure. I do recall some climate change modelling suggesting that a warmer climate in northwest Europe would improve crop yields rather than give us endless muddy seedbeds, making field work impossible. I'm starting to work on the basis arable farming seems to be becoming an increasingly catchier affair and best laid cropping plans will frequently have to be abandoned.

The bitter conundrum here is this: the climate seems to be becoming less conducive to growing half-decent crops and the world population continues to grow, so you might reasonably expect the global price for things like wheat to be ever skyward in a permanent bull run. But alas, there is no such golden lining to sweeten the bitter pill that is this autumn's vinegary weather.

So with a third of this season's planned winter wheat unsown, I'm cultivating a renewed enthusiasm for spring cropping, even if the

last two droughty springs have turned any prospects to dust. I've developed a new theory based on uncorroborated, fanciful evidence that the worse the weather in the preceding autumn, the better it is the following spring. So here's to 2024, what could possibly go wrong?

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.

@essexpeasant

Away from the weather-beaten winter wheat, I've been taking some solace walking the dog in our AB15 Countryside Stewardship. Having sown a standard AB15 mix in mid-May, high pressure duly descended on northeast Essex, leaving our endeavours lying in dust. Undeterred, we re-drilled in late June with a mix of linseed, barley and fescue. It was the linseed that really grew away, to the point that by November, it almost looked like a crop worth combining — not that the weather or the rules would have allowed.

Aside from the 1000kg/ha of high-protein bird-seed to sustain thousands of little brown jobs through the hungry winter months, I was interested to read linseed has an excellent nitrogen/carbon ratio, making it a good carbon sink. So here's to linseed, the new wonder crop that answers multiple environmental challenges.

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