



WITH GUY SMITH

Smith's SOAPBOX

Survival of the fittest

“One of the main winter distractions that punctuated my farm day was patrolling oilseed rape crops for pigeons. The daily routine of checking gas bangers while persecuting the blue menace with aerial bombardments from rockets used to make me feel like a munitions and missile officer in the armed forces.

Without such daily vigilance there'd be an immediate financial loss for the business. However, I did used to wonder if I should include the time and expense involved along with the other variable costs involved when working out net margins.

Winter days seem more relaxed now we've given up growing OSR, replacing the crop with SFI and CSS, mainly NUM3, AHL2 and AB15. The thing is, while OSR has disappeared, the pigeons haven't.

With a remarkably swift demonstration of a species' ability to adapt to a new environment, which emphatically proves Darwin right, *Columba palumbus* has immediately found alternative sources of nutrition in autumn-sown conservation mixes. Clover, trefoil, vetch and radish are the favourites.

I'll confess that while the pigeons have a dawn-to-dusk commitment to ravaging my autumn drilling, my commitment to disturbing their fiendish plans isn't what it was. When protecting a cash crop, the rewards for vigilance are obvious, but when it's a conservation mix, the call of duty is a good deal dissipated.

Consequently this spring I

have several hectares that look like some sort of battlefield after a marauding enemy army has done its worst. Whether the savaged plants bounce back remains to be seen.

The current dispiriting state of these conservation crops reminds me of conversations I was party to 5-10 years ago with Defra officials as they mapped out a new vision for UK agricultural policy and its nascent ag-environmental schemes.

Often expressed in Whitehall's ivory towers was that the schemes should be 'outcome' based. A point I tried to make was that in farming there's many a slip twixt the cup and lip. Unfortunately, there's an army of pests not to mention drought and flood, waiting to make fools of us farmers.

'Outcomes' are easy to envisage but difficult to achieve. To adapt a quote from American president, Dwight Eisenhower: "Ag-environmental outcomes look easy when your plough is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the field destined for NUM3."

To add to the natural world's seeming determination to undo the plans to help it, pigeons aren't the only natural flies in the ointment. Pests such as slugs and bugs are waiting to pounce and various grassweeds ever ready to smother.

What makes conservation crop stewardship more challenging is we can't reach for pesticides as a ready remedy. I'll admit during recent decades, farmers like me have become a little dependent on pesticides. However, watching plants disappear over winter is a keen reminder why we were using them in the first place.

Of course for some options like NUM3 and AB15, we

have non-chemical means of controlling grassweeds – namely the mower – but on this farm the jury's still out as to how effective and expensive it actually is. That said, I'm also conscious that herbicides in the chemical arsenal are becoming increasingly ineffective.

So, it'd be good for the powers that be to take a good hard look at what works when it comes to achieving outcomes in the harsh reality of farming. It's notable how beans are expressly not permitted in SFI options, not even as part of a mixture. This strikes me as odd as they're robust plants which don't succumb to pigeons or slugs, yet deliver pollen and seeds.

Perhaps the fear is farmers might be tempted to harvest what's not meant to be harvested. But with satellite imagery to check this doesn't

happen, combined with painful fines, you'd think it's fairly easy to combat what, at the end of the day, would be defrauding the taxpayer.

So as the green shoots of spring emerge, it's back to the gas bangers and exploding rockets as the blue hordes return to my crops of peas. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

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

CROP STORAGE SPECIALISTS

Grain Storage
Timber Tunnels
Inverters
Controls
Louvers

Timber Floors
Steel Tunnels
Heaters
Fans

WELVENT LTD
 Whisby Way, Whisby Road
 Lincoln LN6 3LQ
 T 01522 693008
 F 01522 500429
 E enquiries@welvent.com
www.welvent.com