



WITH MARTIN LINES

“I'm beginning to think it's time to rethink which crops we are trialling, and the varieties on the AHDB Recommended Lists.

For the past 20 or more years, industry trials have focused on yield as the primary measure of success. To achieve these yields, current varieties require full input and agronomy systems.

When we look at the latest RL, however, it includes varieties that have concerning weaknesses to disease. Weaknesses that require a full fungicide programme – in a good year. What happens when the weather doesn't play ball? Disease pressure is high, but you struggle to get the applications on? All the risk appears to be carried by the farmer.

With our changing climate and unpredictable growing seasons, yield and quality are becoming increasingly unreliable. In the past, the weather was more predictable and we always had the area-based payment supporting the system in a bad year. Making lots of payments to the supply chain for their inputs before yield and quality are known seems to me increasingly difficult to justify.

When we look at European crop trials and recommendations over the past 20 or more years, they've focused more on

Nature NATTERS

Risk and reward

resilience to diseases and low-input systems, not just yield. Achieving really good averages with fewer inputs and better margins surely provides more security for farmers than pushing hard for yields with high inputs in an erratic climate. The bad years that make a loss do more damage than the few, highly profitable years, help us.

Globally, we have an excess of grain and not enough demand for it. All we as farmers can do, is wait, hoping for some kind of problem in the supply chain or production somewhere else in the world that'll lift commodity markets. But, I don't see this coming any time soon.

It's good to see AHDB increasing their trials on low-input systems and looking at profitability as a whole, rather than just the highest yields. I'm not saying yield isn't important, but it all comes back to that risk, and getting poor returns for our investments, while all those in the supply chain can rely on predictable payments for the goods

be committing large sums of money for such poor returns and with such risks.

I was pleased to see Baroness Batter's profitability report that was released before Christmas – it has many good things in it. I really welcome her focus on farm clusters for investment and knowledge exchange, but also the value she puts on nature and natural capital, and the demand for stewardship of these assets to be better rewarded by the market.

I'm becoming increasingly concerned that we're moving towards a model in which a small number of highly productive agro-businesses are directly linked to the supply chain, producing what the market requires with only a small number of contracts. This leaves the vast majority of farmers across the country with a more restricted market, and the profitability of smaller farms becomes increasingly difficult.

I believe that, on the contrary, many working together to deliver outcomes that the supply chain or the market demands has

to be a more positive, equitable and sustainable way forward.

Defra will be making several announcements around the Sustainable

Farming Incentive, Land Use Framework, the Food Strategy and the 25-Year Roadmap for a profitable farming sector during the next few months. I'm hoping these might help inform the industry regarding what's required and where

“How can risk be shared more equitably across the whole supply chain, from crop inputs right through to the consumer enjoying our produce?”

they've sold to farmers.

How can this risk be shared more equitably across the whole supply chain, from crop inputs right through to the consumer enjoying our produce? The way prices currently are, no sensible investor would



When we look at European crop trials and recommendations over the past 20 or more years, they've focused more on resilience to diseases and low-input systems, not just yield.

it should be produced in the years ahead.

But, unless we trade on a level playing field with imported produce, and farm with fewer costly inputs, we're farming with our hands tied behind our backs. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Martin Lines is an arable farmer and contractor in South Cambridgeshire with more than 500ha of arable land in his care. His special interest is in farm conservation management and demonstrating that farmers can profitably produce food in harmony with nature and the environment. He's also chair of the Nature Friendly Farming Network UK. @LinesMartin martin.lines@nffn.org.uk.