

Springing into action



“Effective disease control will be crucial in realising crop potential, but this shouldn’t come at the expense of weed control.”

DR PAUL FOGG

While this season’s winter wheat crops are packed with potential, left unchecked, weeds have the potential to reduce profitability at harvest. *CPM* finds out if there’s still time to gain control.

By Rob Jones and Janine Adamson

After what were coined ‘perfect drilling conditions’ last autumn, fast forward to current times and the weather has delivered the polar opposite – relentless rain. For many, early season weed control has fallen victim to this extreme, but is there still a window of opportunity?

Generally speaking, crop establishment was sound, supported by effective control from autumn herbicides. However, with inevitable survivors plus spring-germinating weeds, there’s no room for complacency, suggests Frontier’s Dr Paul Fogg.

“Residual herbicides performed well in the main and crops are currently in good condition with high yield potential. But, we’re acutely aware we’re moving into a new era for agriculture with much reduced support payments, so

good crop yields are essential.”

Hutchinsons’ Dick Neale adds that in many dry situations, lower-cost products were used initially, followed by more robust residual options once rainfall arrived. “That strategy, combined with wider use of mixtures containing cinmethylin, bixlozone, aclofen, metribuzin, flufenacet and diflufenican, has driven improved control.”

Sequencing has also played a key role, he believes. “Follow-up residual applications, applied when conditions allowed, significantly strengthened overall performance. Gradual wetting and mild weather supported active weed growth, aiding uptake without excessive leaching.”

Cultural control has further reduced blackgrass pressure, points out Dick. “Even where drilling dates were stretched, lower background populations meant

residual chemistry faced less pressure. In many cases, seed return in 2025 was minimal – something to bear in mind if pressure rises again in 2026.”

Paul agrees that the very dry spring and summer last year don’t appear to have affected residual performance. “Seedbeds were in very good condition and there was enough rainfall in October to support herbicide efficacy,” he says.

“The benefit of seedbed quality is still visible in early spring with fields able to cope reasonably well with the



A clean start

According to Frontier’s Dr Paul Fogg, the very dry spring and summer last year don’t appear to have affected residual performance.

wet weather in January and early February. However, it's been difficult or impossible to travel until recently, which puts pressure on fieldwork. Effective disease control will be crucial in realising crop potential, but this shouldn't come at the expense of weed control," he stresses.

Critical to getting on-top of weed pressure is knowing resistance status to ALS chemistry, says Paul. "Obviously, against anything RRR resistant you're better off investing in other parts of the programme. Where you can expect control of a main target weed – blackgrass, Italian ryegrass or brome – aim to apply a post-emergence contact spray as soon as possible.

"We know that mesosulfuron-based products are less dependent on temperature than other options, requiring a minimum of 5°C to perform. Then the addition of thiencazabone in products like Incelo (mesosulfuron+ thiencazabone) and Atlantis Star (mesosulfuron+ iodosulfuron+ thiencazabone) appears to support brome control," he adds.

This is useful, because an increase in conservation tillage appears to be linked with an uptick in brome populations. Equally, autumn residuals aren't as suited to controlling some brome species, meaning spring herbicide applications are becoming more of a priority in many fields, advises Paul.

From 1 March, Pacifica Plus (mesosulfuron+ iodosulfuron+ amidosulfuron) is another option for targeting mixed weeds, he says. "Wild oats, annual meadow and broadleaf weeds are often part of the target population in spring; they must be factored into the decision-making process around the post-em. Adding a residual partner to control subsequent germination is also something to consider

in certain situations.

"It's about farm economics – can you justify the return on investment from a post-em herbicide? Even a few plants can spread and tiller extensively affecting yield and causing higher seed return."

Paul stresses that attention to detail is a must when applying a contact-acting spray. "To get the best performance, it's best to apply as a standalone, not in a mixture with a T0. For crop safety, there has to be a minimum of 7 days between a mesosulfuron post-em and a tebuconazole application."

With little chance for fieldwork in February, workloads may inevitably be compressed. This could lead to hoping a spray will cover both grass and broadleaf weeds, suggests Bayer's Rachel Banks. "Whether it's possible really depends on the weed spectrum.

"Atlantis Star is effective for grassweed control and also combats many key broadleaf weed species such as cleavers, poppy, chickweed, mayweeds and speedwell. Hence, it offers a straightforward solution to many of the mixed weed problems we see in spring.

"If charlock and volunteer oilseed rape are key targets, then you may want to consider Pacifica Plus as an alternative."

According to Rachel, although controlling weeds protects yield for the coming harvest, long-term management must be considered too. "Cutting seed return means fewer potential weeds for future seasons; the smaller the seedbank, the more options a farmer has regarding aspects like crop choice and drilling date come autumn.

"It varies in-field, but 200 seeds/head is a reasonable benchmark for blackgrass and Italian ryegrass. Using a post-em to reduce head counts – in some cases possibly not ▶



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Why climate change is redefining agronomic risk

The impact of shifting conditions across all aspects of crop production, from yield potential to weeds, pests and diseases

Climate change is no longer a theoretical concern for UK agronomy, as evidenced by data presented at the recent Association of Independent Crop Consultants (AICC) conference.

ADAS senior crop research scientist, Christina Baxter, outlined how long-term trial data reveals a growing disconnect between genetic potential and on-farm performance. She said by comparing AHDB Recommended List trial yields with average farm wheat yields since 2002, a clear pattern emerges.

Both datasets show increasing seasonal volatility from around 2006 onwards, but while trial yields continue to rise, on-farm yields have remained static or declined slightly, creating a gap of around 2.5t/ha.

“The fact that both datasets show the same pattern of fluctuation tells us they’re dealing with the same limitations coming from the environment and changing weather patterns,” highlighted Christina.

Average temperatures in central England have risen by about 1°C, while rainfall is increasingly concentrated into heavier winter events, with drier summers becoming more common, she continued.

Yield Enhancement Network (YEN) data has helped to pinpoint how crops are responding, with one of the strongest associations being between wheat maturity and yield. Varieties maturing just two days earlier than the control yield around 1t/ha more, while later-maturing varieties show a similar yield penalty.

Christina said higher temperatures are accelerating crop development, shortening the grain fill period by around 10 days and reducing thousand grain weight. “What we believe is happening is that earlier varieties are flowering and filling grain earlier in the season, under cooler temperatures when more water is available.”

However, options remain limited, with few very early varieties entering the RL in recent years, placing greater emphasis on management, she

added. Furthermore, YEN data shows that spring rainfall strongly influences uptake of phosphorus, manganese and sulphur, while dry springs can severely limit nutrient availability.

Christina stressed that good establishment, timely drilling and flexible nutrient strategies will be essential as weather variability increases.

Also speaking was Professor Richard Pywell from the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH), who presented scenario modelling that explores how climate change could affect yield potential and crop suitability across the UK.

Under a +2°C warming scenario – expected by 2050 – wheat yield potential is projected to increase in northern regions but decline in parts of southern England. Then, under a +4°C scenario, wheat becomes more questionable in the South, with oilseed rape also beginning to suffer.

To support decision-making, UKCEH has developed the Farm Health Check tool, allowing farmers to assess climate risks and future crop suitability at a local scale. Modelling suggests that while crops such as wheat and oats may decline in suitability in some regions, alternatives including durum wheat, chickpeas, lentils and soybean could become more viable.

“Although some of these crops are marginal today, we have to start testing them now,” urged Richard, citing recent rice trials in the Cambridgeshire Fens.

To follow, Dr Helen Fones from the University of Exeter highlighted how pests and pathogens are adapting. She said yellow rust populations are evolving to tolerate warmer conditions, while shifts in fusarium species composition are being observed, with implications for fungicide sensitivity and management.

New threats may also emerge, with milder winters increasing the risk of pests such as Colorado potato beetle and diseases like xylella in grapevines. “Septoria leaf blotch thrives in warm, wet conditions and is therefore expected to become more problematic



Weather extremes

While the UK is still getting the same rainfall, it’s coming in more intense periods, suggested AICC member, Ben Boothman.

in parts of the UK,” warned Helen.

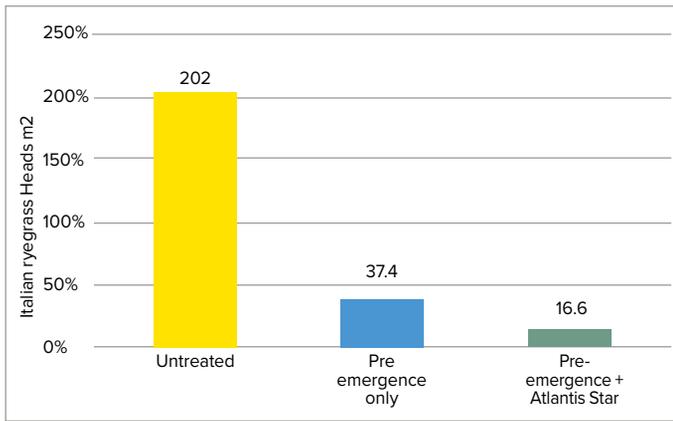
Her research also shows that pathogens like septoria can form biofilms under stress, increasing tolerance to heat, drying and fungicides, and this may be a new area to target disease control strategies.

Reflecting on the evidence, independent agronomist and AICC member Ben Boothman said the science reflects what’s already in-field. “We’re seeing wetter, milder winters and drier, warmer spring summers, but we’re still getting the same rainfall – it’s just coming in more intense periods.”

Earlier-maturing varieties are already proving more resilient on lighter soils, while dry springs are increasingly compromising residual herbicide performance. “Five years ago, drought probably never really entered our heads.

“Now it’s not just about whether the crop will reach its potential, but whether the herbicides we’re applying will to work.”

He believes climate change will demand more flexible rotations, cultivation strategies and crop choices, while also creating opportunities for protein crops such as soya. Crucially, Ben stressed that navigating this uncertainty requires independent, field-specific advice. “You can’t just go off a playbook; everything must be tailored for a specific field or farm,” he concluded.



Controlling Italian ryegrass heads with Atlantis Star

Source: Bayer

- ▶ eliminating the whole plant but reducing its vigour – will have benefits at harvest and beyond,” she comments.

Trials also suggest that using post-em herbicides can reduce the size of blackgrass heads even when the weed isn't killed entirely. “A smaller head size is likely to mean less seed return. Bayer is currently looking at this in more detail this season to

understand exactly how products like Atlantis Star interact with seed production on surviving weeds.”

Looking at what Atlantis Star can offer, Rachel says trials indicate 11% control of Italian ryegrass heads across a programme (see graph). “This equates to 20.8 fewer ryegrass heads/m2. Standalone, the Atlantis Star application provides 56% control; so

within a programme, this makes a valuable contribution to reducing seed return.”

Then, there's the role of adjuvant choice on herbicide efficacy, highlights Dick, as demonstrated in recent Hutchinsons trials. “Increasing Phase II (95% MSO oil) from 0.5% to 1% with Broadway Star (florasulam+ pyroxulam) or Broadway Ultra (mesosulfuron-methyl+ pyroxulam) improves brome control by up to 20%.”

However, ryegrass responds differently, he says. “Adding Phase II alongside Biopower or Probe reduces control from mesosulfuron+ iodosulfuron products, whereas including 0.5% Validate improved ryegrass control by up to 30%. For these mixtures, Biopower or Probe must be included as per the label, with Validate used additionally where appropriate.”

Dick notes that leaf drying within 3-4 hours is essential for contact products. “With



Keeping it simple

Atlantis Star offers a straightforward solution to many of the mixed weed problems seen in spring, proposes Bayer's Rachel Banks.

crops and weeds continuing to grow, applications should be made promptly when conditions allow; water quality is also critical. ALS graminicides respond well to conditioning, and most water supplies will benefit from treatment,” he concludes. ●

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