

Smith's SOAPBOX



WITH GUY SMITH

Spinning the wheel

On the other, I've seldom returned with a clearer idea as to what the future holds, especially when it comes to those to key variables of farm profitability – namely the weather and the markets.

Regarding the wheat market, analysts tell me there's too much good weather in the key wheat growing areas of the world to offer hope of a significant rally in prices, but this forecast is subject to the possibility of change. So that's about as useful as a chocolate teapot. However, it does concentrate the mind on the need for accurate long-term weather forecasts, not just for my little patch, but also for the American/Canadian mid-west and vast fertile but embattled plains around the Black Sea.

Climate change predictions suggest global weather patterns will generally become less helpful to arable cropping. Yet the trouble seems to be that given the local droughts and floods of the past few years, this mainly applies to our little island but not where it really matters, hence the global glut hanging over the markets.

So as we get the fertiliser spinners out for their March duties, the question we ask ourselves is, with wheat prices closer to £150 rather than £200, where do we place the roulette board chip for how much nitrogen to apply?

Last year we cut back to 180kgN/ha, down from our usual 220kgN/ha. The result was a disastrous harvest of low yielding, low protein milling wheat. Whether the low yield was due to the spring drought or my poor fertiliser management, I'll probably never know. As for the low protein, that was definitely my cock-up as I completely miscalculated the nitrogen available to the crop after GS39.

So this year, no matter how dry we get by late spring, I won't miss out on a late season milling wheat spray of 30kgN/ha. There's just no point growing milling wheat that doesn't make the 13% spec.

As for oilseed rape on the farm, these crops excite a lot more management positivity than the wheat; the world seems a lot shorter of vegetable oil than cereals. So I'm feeling more gung-ho when it comes to spending money on those crops.

But as ever with farming there's always a little devil of doubt sitting on your shoulder. My concern is the crop looks disconcertingly forward with plenty of buds and flowers despite the late-August drilling



Defra secretary of state Emma Reynolds announcing to the NFU AGM that for those already in SFI schemes, we should expect radical change. It made me nostalgic for the days when CAP reform came round on a routine 10-year schedule.

date. The nightmare scenario is hard frosts as it comes into full flower in late-April. The other concern is keeping the canopy reasonably open during pod-set when the crop is already looking very vigorous, even if the plant count is less than 20 plants/m².

Last summer I chose a hybrid variety in the hope it'd grow away from any flea beetle pressure, but in the absence of CSFB, it's looking prematurely over-vigorous for my liking. I have to remind myself that this is a lot better than a patchy crop that looks like a moth-eaten carpet from a drones eye view.

So after all the excessive over-thinking, OSR will get the same nitrogen as the wheat – 220kgN/ha. Harvest will leave me either hindsight wise, or hindsight foolish. ●

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

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