

Reaping Rewards

SHARING BEST PRACTICE FROM THE MONITOR FARM PROGRAMME

Autumn 2017



The year ahead

Teresa Meadows
Knowledge Exchange Manager

Here we are, back at the start of a new harvest year. This gives us the opportunity to re-assess, plan and focus on what you are looking to achieve over the next 12 months.

Establishing new crops for harvest 2018 in the best conditions has got to be the first way of ensuring success later in the year. Knowing your fields, soils, weed spectrum and costs allows you to be able to choose the best crop and most appropriate establishment technique for the conditions at the time – flexibility of approach (and patience at times!) is key and the benefits later in the season will be the reward.

We have learnt many lessons through the Monitor Farm programme and wider events over the last year: now is the time

to put these into practice or trial your own version on farm. Here are just some of the suggestions:

- “Benchmark and measure your crop through the key growth stages using the AHDB Wheat Growth Guide. To give the plant the best start, it is advisable to maximise biomass in the early growth stages.”
Brian Barker, Strategic Farm East
- “Aim to create vertical fissures through the soil and a fine, level surface with your cultivations.”
Philip Wright, Wright Solutions
- “Dig a deeper hole to look at your hydraulic connectivity between the top soil and the sub-soil. If you do, take a pack of straws with you when looking for earthworm burrows to identify and showcase your soil health... the more burrows, the more channels for your roots and for drainage.”
Professor Robert Simmons, Cranfield University

- “Use cover crops where relevant in the rotation, but ensure that you use the right species to achieve the improvements you are aiming for.”
Russell McKenzie, Monitor Farmer

These are just a few ideas – plenty more practical tips and useful farmer-to-farmer discussions come from these forums. Have a look at our website to find the reports from the last set of meetings: cereals.ahdb.org.uk/monitorfarms or better still, come along to a Monitor Farm or Strategic Farm meeting this winter to find out more and take part. See you there!

The year ahead continued

AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds have launched a new Strategic Farm programme as part of the Farm Excellence Platform. This will be formed of three commercial arable farms across the country putting research into practice and complementing the work of the Monitor Farm network.

Each Strategic Farm will run for six years to allow independent research to be conducted across a full rotation.

The farms will demonstrate new ways of working in a commercial setting and,

as approaches are subject to full cost-benefit analyses, they can help farmers assess the possibility of changing practices on their own farms.

Brian Barker's farm is the first Strategic Farm covering the East. Brian runs a 513ha family farm and a contracting business in Suffolk.

Put the launch meeting date of 1 November in your diary and look out for more information and details. This will be your first opportunity to hear about the independent, on-farm, costed research.

For more information or to book into a meeting, please contact:

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New level of openness for farmers

The AHDB Monitor Farm project at Stowmarket was characterised by an attitude of openness and trust, according to its members.

Philip Partridge of Westerfield Hall, Ipswich, has attended the Stowmarket Monitor Farm group for the last three years and was invited on to the steering group after the first meeting he attended.

Philip said: "It's interesting talking to farmers from older generations, because they tell me that they would never have been this open before. Many wouldn't have shared their figures and details with neighbouring farmers as we've done here."

Brian Barker hosted the Monitor Farm project at Lodge Farm near Stowmarket. He was announced as the host of a new AHDB Strategic Farm at the final meeting of the Monitor Farm this June.

According to Philip, Brian has been instrumental in setting the tone for the meetings: "Brian is exceptional in his willingness to share openly and in his

ability to communicate. It's fantastic that everyone is so open, honest and willing to share their figures.

"It's definitely putting us on a better footing to help us improve our business."

The meetings have given farmers a good lesson in attention to detail and record keeping, Philip said.

Another Monitor Farm steering group member, Roger Steed, agreed:

"It's such a simple thing, but with the Monitor Farm we get to talk regularly with our neighbours. I probably wouldn't find this in any other forum. We get to concentrate on what we're doing too – it's not like being at the pub or a rugby match."

Discussions and networking at the heart of the Monitor Farm programme have also helped Philip make tangible changes to his business:

"The Monitor Farm gave me the chance to get to know my neighbour better. We had the opportunity to talk and then



Philip Partridge

started to work together. Now we co-operate, for example dressing seed at the same time.

"But it's affected the crops we're growing too. I've made contact with seed companies and now have some trials on our farm. We now grow rye on contract for a customer who we made contact with via the Monitor Farm project."

Find out more

- **AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds soil research:**
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/soil
- **Cover crops:**
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/covered
- **Download Soil Biology & Soil Health Partnership:**
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/publications

Monitor Farms in your area

Yield is usually king when it comes to driving down cereals cost of production.

Huntingdon Monitor Farm host Russell McKenzie, however, has driven his winter feed wheat costs of production down by £12/t over the last three years despite a 1.73t/ha decrease in yield.

At his last Monitor Farm meeting Russell explained that his total cost of production for first winter feed wheat was now down to £96/t.

He has achieved this decrease primarily through changing his machinery policy.

Russell said: “We now have less machinery and do more direct drilling so hope to use the machinery less. This will help to make savings in time and fuel and also to extend the life of the machinery.

“When we changed combine, we bought a used machine, so we also won’t have as big a hit on depreciation.”

Teresa Meadows, AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds Knowledge Exchange Manager, said: “Machinery depreciation and repairs are often one of the largest fixed costs when calculating the cost of production and this has been one of the areas of focus for Russell through benchmarking and during his time as a monitor farmer.”

Russell’s cost of production per tonne for winter feed wheat for the last three years:

Machinery changes between 2014 and 2017:

- Had two combines – now has one
- Had two sprayers – now has one
- Had five main working tractors – now has three

Russell added: “The Monitor Farm programme made us sit back and review what we’re doing. It made us look more closely and analyse our business in detail.

“That’s where the benchmarking really helps. You can compare costs in specific areas. We realised that we didn’t need to be overburdened with lots of machinery.”

Russell has also taken on more contracting work to further spread the labour and machinery costs.

AHDB Monitor Farm groups from harvest 2017 will be benchmarking using the new Farmbench programme, which, for the first time, allows farmers to enter whole-farm costs.

Reflecting on the Monitor Farm programme, Russell said: “I hope people see it as a unique forum for discussing the cutting-edge, nitty gritty sides of the

business that you can’t get from going to any other meetings.”

Russell hopes to continue with this mindset going forwards: “For our own farm, we hope we can keep on improving and not stand still. We want to stay ahead of the curve with varieties too – trying to stay at the forefront of innovation.”

Harvest	2014	2015	2016
Yield (t/ha)	47	37	46
Total variable costs (t/t)	62	70	51
Total costs (£/t)	108	107	96



Russell McKenzie

Case study

Huntingdon: Andrew Mahon

Andrew Mahon, Huntingdon Monitor Farm Steering Group member, has realised the benefits of the Monitor Farm programme through the topics and discussions over the three years.

Andrew said: “One example is the GPS session where we spoke about using yield maps to improve gross margins, which was really helpful. I’ve just gone into Countryside Stewardship so we’ve been pulling out areas that were not

going to yield and putting them in Countryside Stewardship. It made the decision a lot easier.

“The Monitor Farm has made me more open to different ideas. I’m more open to sharing ideas with the Monitor Farm group, because it is a farmer-to-farmer forum.

“I think the open nature of the meetings has been due to Russell – he has been very open with what he has been doing.

“The Monitor Farm programme has been good because we’re all local farmers, but with different varieties and different farms.

“There is no commercial aspect to the meetings, so you take more notice of the results of try-outs.

“Trust is important too. I know that Russ will do things correctly and also be honest about what he is doing.”

Monitor Farm meetings

Chelmsford

Meetings start at 09:00 with a bacon roll at Galleywood Heritage Centre, The Common, Galleywood, Chelmsford, Essex, CM2 8TR

Crop establishment and drill choice:
10 November 2017

Benchmarking and crop marketing:
15 December 2017

Maximising your yield potential:
12 January 2018

Profitable break crops:
Friday 9 February 2018

Dereham

Meetings start at 09:00 with a bacon roll at Beetley Village Hall, High House Road, Beetley, Norfolk, NR20 4BX

Black-grass and precision spraying:
28 November 2017

Your farm business - fit for the future?:
19 December 2017

Enhancing your soil health and soil biology:
16 January 2018

Fungicide efficacy, resistance and micronutrients:
20 February 2018

Current Monitor Farms

Please see the Monitor Farm programme dates to the left for meetings this winter.



Simon Brock,
Dereham Monitor Farm



Christy and Hew Willett,
Chelmsford Monitor Farm

Concluded Monitor Farms

These monitor farmers have now finished their three-year Monitor Farm programme:



Tom Bradshaw, Colchester
Monitor Farm



Brian Barker, Stowmarket
Monitor Farm



Jo Franklin, Royston
Monitor Farm



Russell McKenzie,
Huntingdon Monitor Farm

2016/17 was an action-packed year for the Monitor Farm programme. Missed a meeting or would like to see what was covered over the season and pick up key information for your farm business? Visit the Monitor Farm pages to find out more:

Colchester:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/colchester

Royston:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/royston

Stowmarket:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/stowmarket

Huntingdon:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/huntingdon

Dereham:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/dereham

Chelmsford:
cereals.ahdb.org.uk/chelmsford

Could you be the next Monitor Farm host?

This winter we are looking for new Monitor Farm hosts, to start in summer 2018. Get in touch or visit cereals.ahdb.org.uk/monitorfarms to find out more

Get in touch

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