

Reaping Rewards

SHARING BEST PRACTICE FROM THE MONITOR FARM PROGRAMME

Spring 2018

Striving to be the best



Teresa Meadows
Knowledge Exchange Manager

A warm welcome to the spring 2018 edition of Reaping Rewards.

Benchmarking is one of the key indicators of a resilient farm business that is fit for the future. We should all be doing it, but are we?

Benchmarking is a method of examining business performance by comparing agreed performance indicators against a group of your peers. It was certainly a key part of business for companies in the water industry, where I used to work.

Water companies benchmark continually between themselves, all striving hard to be the best. Benchmarking in this industry includes measuring a number of parameters from leakage rates to numbers of burst mains and iron compliance. However, the most important is the annual Service Incentive Mechanism (SIM) score, measuring

customer service. Water companies then earn rewards or receive penalties, depending on their customer service performance.

To calculate the SIM score, an independent survey is conducted each year and asks customers who have recently contacted a water company, how the company handled their query and resolved their issue.

A 5 out of 5 score is the aim and companies then use these averages to benchmark against each other. You can't be seen to be the best water company if you have the best scores on the other measures, but compare poorly on your SIM score, so customer service and all-round business performance is crucial.

Our industry does not have co-ordinated external financial incentives to be industry leading. However, the principles of being the best at what you do, excelling in customer service, benchmarking and top quality business management are the same across any industry.

In this issue, we have case studies from two of our monitor farmers who have been trying alternative new break crops in their rotation.

You can assess the financial and agronomic competitiveness of these break crops in the rotation by benchmarking both your gross margin and full cost of production. Inevitably, some crops are grown for other reasons, for example to fix nitrogen but, if you know the costs, then you can assess your farm business on all levels.

So, if you haven't done so already, register for Farmbench (farmbench.ahdb.org.uk), enter your figures for your enterprises and see how you compare with your peers for your gross output, variable and fixed costs. Or take it to the next stage and join one of our Arable Business Groups to benchmark within the industry and find out how you compare in a supportive environment.

To find out more, please get in touch.

Monitor Farms in East Anglia

AHDB Monitor Farms bring together groups of like-minded farmers who wish to improve their businesses by sharing performance information and best practice, and this edition of Reaping Rewards includes the latest updates from the farms in your region.

The winter meetings saw discussions on enhancing soil biology, making businesses resilient and choosing profitable break crops. Other meeting topics included management strategies for weed control, the importance of succession planning and machinery

replacement strategies. All meeting topics are tailored to your region, covering matters important to farming near you.

Why not come along and get involved with the Monitor Farms?

The dates for the summer meetings are:

Dereham Monitor Farm: 5 June 2018

Chelmsford Monitor Farm: 22 June 2018

To find out what's happening in your region, contact me on

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Or visit cereals-blog.ahdb.org.uk or cereals.ahdb.org.uk/monitorfarms

Could alternative crops ease the burden of grass-weeds, soil management?

To become more profitable and resilient, modern farm rotations are constantly evolving to include both alternative crop establishment systems and crops. These two areas of business development go hand in hand, as Christy and Hew Willett, Chelmsford monitor farmers, and Simon Brock, Dereham monitor farmer, are finding out.

Chelmsford Monitor Farm: The Willetts' Millet

Having successfully tried millet for the first time in 2017 in one field, mother and son team Christy and Hew Willett are now growing 55ha of it.

Christy explains: "Our motivation was rye-grass control which is a big problem on our farm. Millet was a more profitable option than putting the land into fallow for two years."

Why millet?

Millet is drilled in the middle of May, just before rye-grass produces a viable seed head and is harvested at the end of September.

When integrating millet into the rotation, the Willetts had to consider not only the growing season of the rye-grass weed, but also crop establishment, pest control, and wet soil conditions during a later harvest window.

Minimising resistance risk

Before drilling, the field is disced to remove rye-grass survivors or seedlings. To minimise the risk of resistance, the field is sprayed only once to control rye grass.

Hew said: "We rely on the fullness of the millet crop to outcompete any black-grass that may appear.

"While there wasn't a 100 per cent success rate and some rye grass returned, we were pleased with the results."

The millet, which yielded an average of 3.5t/ha, was direct drilled both into bare winter barley stubble and stubble which

had a dense canopy of volunteers. The half of the field which had the volunteers suffered from poorer establishment, due to a large slug population.

"This year, we will be removing the green cover, experimenting with spraying off at different timings and, potentially, running a shallow disc over the fields to control slugs and rye grass."

Hew is also pleased with the labour and soil management aspect of growing millet. The later drilling window allows the land to dry out without having to move soil in the autumn. Ground wetness is also a consideration for the late harvest window.

"We had quite a wet September and conditions weren't great for combining but the benefits of the late drilling window outweigh the negatives of the late harvest."

For guidance on weed management, visit cereals.ahdb.org.uk/weeds

Cost benefit

With a gross margin of £595/ha, millet at first seems less profitable than barley and beans at £650/ha and £600/ha, respectively. However, when the lower machinery and labour costs are factored in, the net return of £410/ha for millet is higher than the £400/ha for barley and £375/ha for beans.



Christy and Hew Willett

Time to look beyond barley for your spring cereal? Visit cereals.ahdb.org.uk/beyondbarley



Simon Brock

Swapping spring barley for soya

The trend for alternative cropping is not only on the Chelmsford Monitor Farm. Simon Brock, Dereham monitor farmer, also tried millet in 2017 and is looking ahead to growing soya in 2018.

Simon first drilled millet in late April 2017 after a wheat crop failed, due to increased slug pressure following oilseed rape.

Simon explains: "It was quite a wet spring and it wasn't until nearly May that we were able to drill. We had a short growing season on a field prone to black-grass, so millet seemed like a viable option."

The crop averaged 3.9t/ha and, although it was harvested wet, the cost of production including batch drying was low. Overall, the gross margin of growing millet was £510/ha, and it offers the farm an additional black-grass management strategy.

Swapping to soya

This year, Simon is looking at growing soya instead of spring barley on light land with low gross margin potential for second spring barley. Simon is interested to see how soya could work as a break crop for the farm rotation.

Key agronomy points:

1. Get a good seedbed, avoid compaction, conserve moisture
2. Sow at 2.5–3.8cm into a warm bed from 21 April at the very earliest
3. Maximum sowing depth is 4.45cm
4. Apply pre-emergence herbicide
5. Keep pigeons away for 2–3 weeks during establishment
6. Do post-emergence weed control
7. Tank-mix a fungicide with the post-emergence weed control if the field has a history of sclerotinia

It's not just about what you put in the ground, it's how you do it

Simon has been trialling alternative establishment systems for the past six years. He will drill the soya mid-May, following minimal cultivations to ensure that no moisture is lost.

Alternative crops

When looking at alternative crops, consider:

- The specific needs of a particular end market
- Being assured of the market before sowing the crop
- Selecting the right genetics from a wide range of varieties, to best deliver those specific needs
- Choosing the right contract for the crop and you
- Having confidence that the crop will be stored and processed to the end user's specification

Find out what Jack Smith, Leicester monitor farmer, learnt about alternative crops:

cereals.ahdb.org.uk/leicester

(meeting report from 15 November 2016)



What do you think of Reaping Rewards?

Tell us what you think of Reaping Rewards, by emailing eleanor.holdsworth@ahdb.org.uk with your answers to the questions below or by completing the online survey bit.ly/2kTFbXq

- 1) Do you want information on AHDB activity in your area? Yes No
- 2) Do you want information about AHDB activity in other areas but with similar farming conditions to yours? Yes No
- 3) How would you prefer to receive that information? (List all that apply)
 - Printed newsletter
 - Email
 - AHDB website
 - Twitter/facebook
 - Meeting/event
 - Podcast
 - Youtube video
 - Blog
 - Other



AHDB's Horizon reports contain in-depth analysis to help make your business fit for the future. Find out more at ahdb.org.uk/brexit

Get in touch

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