**SEASON UPDATE: Navigating the season: wheat‘s varied yield potential, early disease and difficult decisions**

* **Varied establishment within early, mid and late drilled wheat crops**
* **Potential for high disease pressure across all major diseases makes effective, broad-spectrum products key at T0 and T1**
* **Brown rust lesions spotted in forward Crusoe crop mid-February**

Drilling winter wheat in three distinct autumn weather windows means Warwickshire farmer Andrew Keyte has a wide range of yield potential to manage this spring, and with the first sign of disease visible in mid-February, thoughts are rapidly turning to this year’s fungicide programme.

Mr Keyte manages Ragley Home Farms in Alcester, Warwickshire. Of the farm’s 1,600 arable hectares, half is in production while the remainder is in the mid-tier stewardship scheme or under SFI.

“We’ve 15 soil types here - everything from sand to blue clay,” explains Mr Keyte. “Even though our average field size is just 6-6.5ha, we can go from one extreme to another in a single field. It makes farming complicated and is why there are so many crops in the rotation.”

Ragley Home Farms produces winter oilseed rape, winter barley, borage, spring barley, oats and winter wheat. Some land is rented out for vegetable production and the farm is home to 1,000 sheep.

**Autumn drilling falls into three windows**

“Due to black-grass we used to hold back drilling until mid-October. This year we started sowing winter wheat on 16th September but had to put the drill back in the shed on 21st September when it started raining,” says Mr Keyte.

Other than a small window around 5th October when some oats and wheat were sown, the drill wasn’t in the field again until 6th November when Mr Keyte completed sowing 325ha in ten days.

According to the local BASF Agronomy Manager, Colin Mountford-Smith, Mr Keyte’s situation is typical of the region.

“Most of the growers in central & west midlands got their planned acreage drilled this past autumn,” he says. “The West of the region had a good window early in the season, and again from the middle to the end of October. This was when most of the acreage went in the ground. Andrew’s further east, and was unlucky to have this window short cut.

“Unfortunately, at the back end of the season, emerging crops faced a lot of rainfall, leading to some re-drilling or backward or thinner crops.”

**Drilling date, weather and soil type lead to variable establishment**

While drilling date and weather have been important factors, soil type has often determined how well crops have established at Ragley Home Farms.

“In the main, the September drilled winter wheat got away well. Some of the Extase even got a bit ahead of itself and we might hold back fertiliser to try and let it catch up.  We have also got wheat from this early drilling slot that went into lighter land that suffered with the heavy rain - the soil capped and the crop got wet before it had a chance to establish.  It hasn’t recovered.

“The October drilled crops generally look okay, but the November-drilled wheat is also variable.”

**Fungicide programmes to kick off with broad-spectrum products**

As well as working out which fields to redrill this spring, Mr Keyte is thinking about his fungicide programme for the season.

“We’ve not sat down and drawn up the season’s programmes yet but as we spotted brown rust coming through in the Crusoe when crop walking on the 14th February, we’ll be applying a fairly strong T0 on some of the crops. Last year we’d a tebuconazole mix but I think there’s more disease around this year and some of the crops went into the ground earlier.”

Colin agrees, adding: “With the relatively mild autumn and winter, there’s potential for high pressure from all the major diseases this year and anything that was drilled early will be more vulnerable. These crops, in particular, would benefit from the broad-spectrum control Revystar XE offers early in fungicide programmes.

“Across 31 BASF and independent trials we’ve seen it consistently outperform Ascra Xpro at T1 giving, on average, a 0.21t/ha uplift in yield1. This season Revysol-based products will offer fantastic value on farm and definitely feature in the programme.“

“Revysol  can also help to protect other chemistry within the programme which have a higher resistance risk.  The newer SDHIs and Qiis for instance, when used at high rates can apply a higher selection pressure and should be protected“

Reducing the risk of resistance developing is a consideration for Mr Keyte when putting together his fungicide programmes.

“We follow the advice from the manufacturers, use a variety of modes of action, pay attention to rates and try not to use the same active ingredients too often. We don’t want to be losing any fungicides through misuse,” he says.

With such a wide variety of crops to manage this spring, Mr Keyte is likely to have a variety of programmes depending on yield potential and disease pressure.

“Thinner crops will have "as little as possible, but as much as necessary“ but those with potential will have whatever they need to keep them clean. With so much of the winter wheat not likely to yield what it should, we need to get the most out of those that will.

“For now, however, it’s about fertiliser applications and trying to move some of those more backwards crops forward.”

-**ends-**

1Based on rates of 0.75l/ha of Revystar® XE and 1.0l/ha Ascra® Xpro

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