



Introduction to Better Farms

As with other sectors, Teagasc are using their concept of BETTER farms to help improve the technical efficiency of tillage farms. The word BETTER is not necessarily to imply superior or best but rather it is an acronym for Business, Environment and Technology through Training, Extension and Research. And this is very much what research and advisory staff are doing in the three tillage farms in counties Cork, Wexford and Meath.

The BETTER farm programme aims to assist Irish tillage farmers to improve profitability and to further strengthen links between the grower, advice and research. The objective is to achieve maximum efficiency on these farms and to use them as a benchmark for efficient production and for transferring knowledge to other farmers.

The following is a very short introduction to the three Crops BETTER farms across Ireland.

Cork Crops BETTER Farm

The Crowley farm outside Mallow is run on a full time basis by John and Denis (brothers) with the help of their father, Denis senior.

John and Denis are the two main labour units on the farm with some additional help at harvest and planting. The farm size is 380 hectares – (approx 950 acres, mostly owned). Soil type varies with location across the different farms from light to medium. The cropping plan is dominated by winter barley and winter wheat with no break crops. All grain is stored and dried before sale to maximise returns. One of the main challenges on the farm over the coming years is to maintain yields with their current rotation.

Wexford Crops BETTER Farm

The Wexford Crops BETTER farm is run by George and Ken Williamson. This father and son operation, in South Wexford, is a typical farming operation of the area and they farm a combination of winter and spring crops with some contracting as part of their business. The soil type is mainly heavy to medium. Cropping was dominated by spring cereals but the Williamsons are currently switching to a predominately winter cereal rotation.

The Williamsons rent approx. 75% of the 131 hectares farmed and carry out a range of contracting services locally from ploughing and sowing cereals, to beet harvesting. Grain is sold at harvest.

Meath Crops BETTER Farm

Joe O'Donoghue and his brother, Colm, are full time farmers in the Meath Dublin catchment. Approximately 68% of their 270 ha of land is rented with most of the land in smaller parcels spread 20 mile from their base near the Stamullen, Co Meath. The cropping programme is dominated by winter wheat

and spring barley. Access to a stable and affordable land bank has proven a challenge year in year out in this highly competitive tillage area.

Fragmentation and distances between rented parcels are a factor in running the O Donoghue farm. The O'Donoghues are exploring all avenues to minimise this fragmentation including; Share Farming, long term lease and rental of larger parcels. All grain is dried before sale.

February Diary

This article will be carried every month with a look at the major decisions and concerns of the Crops Better Farmers.

Cork

“Winter barley is only starting to rise its head after the winter so I intend to get the first split of nitrogen on shortly” commented John Crowley, the Cork Teagasc Tillage Better Farmer. John said his 150 ha of barley have come through the winter well and the crops have a brighter colour than expected considering the winter. Plant counts are more than adequate and tiller numbers are between 3-5 per plant. “I will apply the first nitrogen early next week with the P and K in the form of 10:10:20” commented John. From Johns experience this should be adequate to feed early growth.

At the moment barleys are clean with little or no disease evident however John was very interested in results from Oak Park (from a trial conducted on his farm last year) and is considering adjusting his fungicide programme to apply the first application earlier than normal (mid March) to this crop to protect tiller numbers.

Winter wheats were all sown on the farm before the 15th October and are looking well on the Crowley farm. The first fertiliser application to these crops is likely to be 10:10:20 in early March followed within a couple of weeks with CAN + S to top up to 70-90kg/ha of N. “Just using 10:10:20 on low K index fields will leave crops around 40 units/ac short of expected crop off takes, so targeting these fields with extra potash is a necessity” explained Johns Teagasc advisor Ciaran Collins. As many of the crops are in continuous tillage the associated take-all risk dictates that a higher proportion of the total nitrogen is aimed at the early timing.

Wexford

Replanting oats is the main concern for the Teagasc Tillage Better farmer George and Ken Williamson. “it’s the gamble you take planting a spring oat in winter but as we are only 2 miles from the sea it has worked well for us for the past 15 years” commented Ken. Most of the oats has escaped but Ken still thinks there are some viable plants left in the problematic fields. “it’s a waiting game and we will make a final decision this week” said Ken.

Winter wheat has become a major part of the rotation on the Williamson farm as part of a conscious shift away from spring cereals. Ken said that even though spring cereals were yielding well, winter cereals in a good rotation could leave a higher margin and the switch suited spring work load. Winter

wheat crops are looking well with good plant stands but crop growth has been less than normal due to the cold winter. Soil conditions have deteriorated over the past two weeks and Ken recons it will be sometime before they can travel the land.

All soil samples have been updated over the past year and a plan for P and K was devised to best suit the farm. According to their Teagasc advisor John Pettit "Many of the Williamson fields are in index 2-3 for P and K and 11:9: 22 is ideally suited for their requirements, taking into account extra yield". This is a special mix and best suits the soil index levels on the farm however rates will vary a little with soil fertility index. All the fertiliser has been sourced in big bags and will be delivered over the next week.

Despite the current wet spell Ken is delighted with the amount of ploughing completed to date and is happy to report they are well ahead of schedule.

Meath

Last autumn was one of the best for crop establishment according to Joe O Donoghue, Teagasc Tillage Better farmer in Meath. According to Joe "Crops were planted in great conditions and establishment was almost ideal. There is an entire crop in every field with no wet spots or dodgy headlands this year". Very few of Joes crops received a winter herbicide and this is one of the jobs which Joe is weighing up at the moment. "Over the past number of years I have used a combination of Pacifica and a cleaver product to good effect. The products cleared almost all weeds apart from Bindweed" said Joe. So far crops are not dirty but meadow grass is present and Joe is anxious to keep it at bay. His other concern is wild oats. "Pacifica has covered all the major weeds and I am happy with the product however I am conscious that my Teagasc advisor Shay Phelan warned against repeated use due to the possibility of resistant weeds building up" said Joe.

"There is still time to apply a winter type herbicide like DFF and IPU as growth is still very slow however the end of February is the cut off date" commented Shay Phelan. A decision as to the product will be taken in the coming week on the farm.

"We have all our N, P and K requirements for the year purchased and are ready to apply the first nitrogen and P and K as soon as the weather takes up" said Joe. Joe has some Urea to apply as soon as he can travel the ground in a couple of fields to combat rabbit grazing. Another job which is a priority is a field with very low manganese. "Other years the manganese deficiency would be apparent by now but the cold dry winter must have enabled the plant to scavenge more manganese from the soil" according to Joe. Nevertheless this field will get a foliar application of manganese as soon as ground conditions are suitable.

Joe weighs up decisions carefully and listens to other growers in the Teagasc Discussion Group. During the last meeting fertiliser rates were a hot topic and time of application was also discussed. Discussion centred on the correct rates for continuous winter wheat. Joe is in agreement that this year he will

apply a little more than normal (total 70kg/ha/N) as the growth in crops is not as strong as other years and he is a little concerned that the rooting system is not where it should be.

As Joes business is dependent on rented land he is in negotiations with land owners at present. High prices of the final product are fuelling land owners expectations but the final price (forward selling) can be set now for grain at harvest and margins worked out according to Joe. "it's a difficult to make conacre pay year in year out. What you make last year may be given away this year" commented Joe. However he added "it's a competitive area and we will always strive to get the best deal we can while maintaining an excellent standard of management for any land we rent".