Introduction to Better Farms

By Michael Hennessy, Tillage Specialist, Oakpark

Last year the three Teagasc Crop Better Farms shared their experiences of growing crops through the season. As with other sectors, Teagasc are using the concept of BETTER farms to help improve the technical efficiency of tillage farms. The word BETTER is not necessarily to imply superior or best farmers 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 in the region. Oakpark research continues to use these farms as a focal point to conduct research so that resulting recommendations are robust for use by farmers through the country.

In conversation with the growers over the past week they have outlined some of the challenges which continue to face them during the growing season and also areas where they are targeting to either improve efficiency, reduce costs or improve the way transactions are handled on the farm.

Crowleys in Cork

There are a couple of areas where the Crowleys are focusing their attention on improving the farm this year. “We have a number of projects on going this year and on the tillage front we will keep an eye on the rotational potential of oilseed rape and the costs of growing winter wheat and a longer term plan to increase our dryer capacity” said John.

John is worried that the growing costs of winter wheat are squeezing the margins up to the point where winter barley or spring barley may be more profitable. “Locally this year there is talk of winter wheat disease control costing over €90/acre. Last year we kept crops clean through the season for around €50/ac plus VAT. According to results from Teagasc septoria populations haven’t changed from last year and I don’t expect to change my fungicide spend much this year” added John. The Crowleys planted oilseed rape for the first time this year and based on results will deciding how the crop may fit into their current farming system.

Williamsons in Wexford

George and Ken Williamson were in the middle of sowing spring barley when I caught up with them late last week. The Williamsons critically evaluated their spring cultivation system last year and were not happy with the results. “Our one pass was working well but the dry season highlighted the ground was not consolidated enough and lines (underneath the tractor) of poorly established crop were clearly visible” said George. “We decided to purchase a machine to help consolidation before sowing and settled on the Vaderstad Carrier 420 to complete the job” added George. Initial impressions are good with a firm seedbed, high work rates and an initial fuel usage measured at 3.5 litres of diesel per acre. The other major area where the Williamsons
want to target is the purchasing of goods and services for their business. “We have had initial contacts with local farmers to set up a buying group and we intend to look at this more closely this year” said George. The final area where the Williamsons will continue to focus on is the acquisition of land. Rented land forms a large part of the farm business and the Williamsons would like more stability on rental and feel a five or seven year lease would allow them to develop their business sustainably. “We have been successful in signing one long term lease in the past six months but we are anxious to convert more of our conacre into a more stable and predictable arrangements” said George.

**O’Donoghues in Meath**
Reducing the costs of fuel is a major focus on the O Donoghues farm this year. “From sowing to straw removal, to complete all operation in an acre of winter wheat consumes about 40 litre of diesel” according to Joe. Joe feels that this can be reduced and has already taken steps such as reducing plough depth by one inch, reducing tractor revs during operations and is seriously considering whether grain drying will be a feature on the farm this year. Another area where Joe is investing is in GPS technology. “We are fitting our sprayer with GPS on/off technology and we recon we can say between 6-10% on agrochemicals this year” said Joe. If this is successful Joe will consider extending this technology to his fertiliser spreader.