

TILLAGE

December 2023

Crop management

Edited by

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Unfortunately for most tillage farmers 2023 has been one of the most difficult seasons in living memory. It will therefore be remembered for a long time for all the wrong reasons. A difficult start to the year was compounded by a drought at the wrong time and it's been pretty much wet since the end of June. The difficulties have continued into autumn and it is going to leave farmers with many difficult decisions to make over the coming weeks and months.

1. Can I still sow?

Planting crops in December is a very risky game. The plants will not appear above ground for four to six weeks and will be at risk of damage from pests and flooding. Yields are normally substantially lower due to these losses, and there is also the added risk of causing compaction from working in wet soils. However, spring cereal seed is in tight supply and may be very expensive, so



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although it is not ideal, it looks like winter wheat seed in particular will continue to be drilled where opportunities arise until February, especially in heavier soils where spring barley does not have a good history of yielding well. Given the situation many growers are in, especially in the south and north east, continuing to drill wheat may be the least worst option.

2. Should I still apply an autumn herbicide or not?

In the case of winter barley where fields contain high populations of annual meadow grass then the answer is yes, provided the land is trafficable and the crop is not suffering from any other issues. There are quite a number of crops which are struggling from water logging, etc., and the addition of a herbicide could set them back further, especially late-drilled crops. If it's broadleaved weeds that are the issue in wheat, barley or oats, then there are options for spring control.

3. Should I spray for aphids?

This is a very difficult question to answer but if the crops have been sown in late October then the research would suggest that the risk is lower than crops sown in early October. Crops sown in early October or near the coast are in a higher risk category and may benefit from an application. The cold temperatures and high rainfall will help to reduce the risk.

4. Will I have to re-sow crops in the spring?

Many crops were planted in less than ideal conditions and some will have significant losses. The decision to re-plant should be based on economics and not aesthetics. Carry out a plant count and remember that if plants are evenly spaced, then even at relatively low plant counts, e.g. 100-150 plants/m² for wheat, you can still get an economic crop.

5. Can I sow winter wheat seed in the spring?

Yes you can, provided that the germination rates hold up and the seed is sown before

the middle of February. Seed dressings can reduce the germination rate so carry out a test before planting. Crops drilled after the middle of February normally have a lower yield.

6. Am I okay for the eco-scheme measures?

The two and three crop rule is a concern for many winter cereal growers, so now is the time to sit down with your advisor and calculate your individual requirements. For many growers it will be the ratio of crops that are sown that will be the issue and not the number of different crops. There are still plenty of options but pick the ones that suit your farm the best. Don't wait and hope there is another derogation similar to last year.

In crops that are drilled, slugs and crows continue to be a problem so keep monitoring crops on a daily basis, especially those away from the yard and those that are struggling. In wheat crops there is no panic to apply herbicides as there are plenty of options in the spring; however, in the case of barley consider using flufenacet-based products (Firebird, etc.) or pendimethalin (Stomp, etc.) to control grass weeds while they are small. Once annual meadow grass begins to tiller it is much more difficult to control in spring. December is often when oilseed rape crops are treated with Kerb or Astrokerb, so if there have been no herbicides applied already, these will give good control of a range of weeds.

Farm performance

Judging performance in a year such as this can give a very negative view of a farm business. While December is always a good month to take stock of what has happened during the previous season and then plan for the coming season, this may well be the year where you simply assess options that can make the farm more resilient in terms of income, soils, labour, etc.

If the scientists are to be believed we may see more years like 2023 rather than 2022, so how will we cope if we get more years like this?

The good news is that there are plenty of opportunities arising for tillage farmers. One of which is taking in animals on a B&B basis from beef or dairy farms to bring them in line with the new derogation rules. There is also the option of taking in sheep to graze off catch crops. There are contracts for higher value crops and look at the many suitable Department of Agriculture, Food and the

Marine (DAFM) schemes. These things can help farmers overcome tough years.

While it may be painful to do this year, contact your local advisor and complete a Teagasc eProfit Monitor (EPM), or as many have called it this year a “loss monitor”. Although the figures for many may not look good, they can still provide useful information about the farm for the year. While we would always encourage farmers to do one on a yearly basis, the real benefits become apparent when you have multiple years EPMs completed. You can then start to compare different crop performance over different years. You can spot trends on the farm, which are more reliable than an analysis from one year. For those farmers who participated in the Knowledge Transfer Scheme over the last three years, they should have three years of very good data to work from. The 2019 EPM should be completed now so contact your local advisor.

Nutrient management planning

Another job that can be completed in the coming weeks is a nutrient management plan for 2024. With the fertiliser register now active you must make sure that you are compliant with the nitrates rules when it comes to buying chemical fertiliser. Check to make sure that all fields have an up-to-date soil analysis report and, if not, organise to get any



Get any soil tests you need done now.

outstanding fields tested as soon as possible. These soil tests will be the basis of the nutrient management plan and will determine which and how much fertiliser you can buy. Remember, if you don't have an up-to-date soil test, your fertiliser P allowance is zero. Likewise, if you intend to

use organic manures you simply cannot risk using them unless you can calculate the balance that is to be supplied by chemical fertilisers. Time will quickly run out in the spring to get this done, so contact your local advisor or agronomist before the spring work begins.

HEALTH & SAFETY



Staying safe over Christmas

It is important to be mindful of the safety of children during this time. Ensure there is a safe secure play area in place when children are outside. When children are in the farmyard they must always be supervised. Easy to read danger signs should be in place and these signs should be explained to children. Give preventing fires in your home and on your farm your attention. Irish research has shown that farmers and agricultural workers account for 20% of all fire deaths. Almost all fires occur in dwelling houses. This level is proportionately higher than other sectors. Contributory factors include smoking, high alcohol consumption,



Keep safety in mind at this time of year.

plugged in or faulty electrical devices, open fires, frying or chip pans, and a small number of fires are linked to candles.

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