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Knowledge Reaps Rewards During Challenging Times

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At a recent open day at our main trials site in Fife, we were basking in a glorious day with temperatures comfortably in the mid-twenties. More than hot enough for your average fair-skinned Scot. One visitor, who the day before had been at a field day in Lincolnshire commented on how pleasant the day was, having endured temperatures ten degrees hotter a mere 300 miles further south.

It is another of many anecdotes this summer that highlights how extreme our weather patterns are becoming. As I write, our combines are working hard in wheat, at least two weeks ahead of what would have been regarded as normal just a few years ago. Are we what Lincolnshire was just a year or two back? While the run of dry weather is good for rapid harvest progress, it is a genuine concern when it signals a longer-term shift towards the parched soils and yield volatility that our southern neighbours are already contending with.

Most Scottish arable systems are optimised to deal with wet conditions, but in recent years near-drought has been just as likely. Agronomy and crop management is having to change. The answers ahead are not simply in product-led solutions but in integrated thinking around variety selection, soils, system resilience and drilling strategy. Indeed, the future may be more about risk management than maximising yields.

The businesses coping best are increasingly building flexibility into their systems to adapt establishment methods to meet the season. The success of this approach is self-evident, but comes at higher capital cost, with the need for new machinery, and in current markets, is hard to justify, particularly for smaller businesses. But the most costly crop is one that fails, so the extra cost of hiring in the most suitable kit, from the machinery ring or a neighbour, to get the establishment right may be the best, first loss in the long term.

Soil health has rightly returned to the fore and arguably should always have been there. Small interventions in structural management, drainage, fertility and pH can return massive benefit. But successful soil management means knowing your soil. Testing and monitoring regularly so change can be planned is much more effective than reacting too late to poor yield performance. Most

We are increasingly seeing that higher spending on inputs doesn't automatically deliver higher yields and decisions around variety choice and integrated crop management are becoming much more critical.

When costs are high, the margin for error is so much less forgiving. There is a lot growers can't control - the weather, the markets, input costs - but we can control how we use the information that is available to us – and that's where the value now sits. Using the knowledge we have to make small but precise decisions about management and input use can be the core difference between success and failure.

At Scottish Agronomy, we would also add collective knowledge as a key ingredient to success. Working alongside some of the best growers in the country, the exchange of ideas runs both ways, and that pooled experience compounds year on year. While we run tens of thousands of cutting edge, scientifically-rigorous field trials which produce extraordinary data, it's the growers who amplify its value.

An example of this is some recently harvested winter barley trials which revealed that informed variety selection could lead to an almost three tonnes per hectare yield difference. The same results were borne out on members' own farms. When you consider that the growing costs were the same for both the best and the worst performing varieties, it is knowledge that can reap rewards.

Harvest results so far in Scotland seem to be more mid-table respectability rather than championship winning performance, but when you consider what our southern neighbours are enduring, many English growers would give their eye-teeth for our yields compared to their own. The challenge for all of us is to keep looking ahead and build, share and use knowledge to manage risk and maximise potential.