

20 December 2023

General Comments

A succession of storms means soils have been (at best) very wet or at worst badly flooded. It varies a lot by region and for the south west rainfall levels are fairly normal and winter crop plans are relatively unaffected. For the major cropping regions from Borders up towards the north east however heavy rain and flooding has been significant and winter crop acreage is down with winter wheat the main crop affected. Winter barley and winter oilseed rape was generally in and well established before the Storm Babet, but later drilled wheats were more affected and some fields planned for late drilled wheat remain unplanted. There is a predicted move towards spring cropping as a result. The potato harvest is mostly now in, and careful drying is required as soil cover on later lifts is inevitable. Despite concerns over vegetable crops most are not routinely planted on flood plains but strawing down carrots was difficult and straw is in short supply. Harvest conditions for Christmas delivery are difficult and slower than usual but progressing.

Regional Comments

INVERNESS

Crops in Inverness have continued to suffer with the prolonged wet weather. Winter wheat has struggled the most and wet areas and endrugs are very patchy. Of course, the area of wheat sown is less than it would have been with a lot of potato ground which was planned for wheat not being sown. Some areas of potatoes are not even lifted. This in turn is putting pressure on spring barley seed supplies with an increased area to plant. Oilseed rape is fairing well, having a better established canopy and root system than wheat has meant it is more resilient. The min-tilled OSR crops look best of all. The combination of a consolidated surface and the drainage action of a the sub-soiler leg has worked well. Winter barley is also in relatively good condition, having been established longer these crops are much more resilient. Diseases pressure is low across the board.

BANFF & BUCHAN

The last month has seen a very cold, frosty spell at the start of December bookended by yet more heavy rain. Winter land work has been sporadic at best, with farmers having to pick their fields carefully when ploughing. Lime and FYM remains unspread with many fields of oilseed rapes and cereals missing their autumn sprays due to the ground conditions. Despite the heavy rain and wet soils, autumn crops are looking remarkably well, particularly those that were sown and well established before the heavy rains arrived. Oilseed rapes have lost a bit of the lushness, which given how forward some crops looked, may be no bad thing although a number of crops have missed out on their LLS spray.

Winter barley crops are yellowing in places although never seem to like getting their feet wet for very long and winter wheats just seem to keep growing away very slowly – what the heavy rains mean for the effectiveness of herbicides and requirement for follow up sprays remains to be seen. Potatoes have all been lifted although the lifting some of the later crops has clearly left its mark on some fields with some remedial work needed to address compaction and improve structure. While harvest 2023 turned out much better than feared, the effects of the wet autumn elsewhere is starting to weigh on farmers minds as concerns grow as to the potential size of the 2024 spring barley crop, with seed prices already jumping in response to increased demand.

ABERDEENSHIRE

When will it ever stop raining has been the common question since October. Only the driest and most freely draining of fields have coped with the last few months of rain, and it is highlighting the importance of having resilient soils. If climate change is going to bring more of this type of weather we're going to need to improve the condition of our soils and adapt accordingly – none of which will be easy. Every situation is different, whether it be cropping poorly draining soils, timing of operations (e.g. late sowing), reducing cultivations or adapting rotations and building organic matter content in soils to build stability, but it's all making farmers think about the future. Looking at crops the early established winter crops are not too badly affected and are looking as good as can be expected given the wet weather, but there will be more fields with wet drowned out patches next year and decisions will need to be made whether to keep them in early spring. This, however, will depend on availability of spring barley seed, as reports suggest it could be scarce, due to lack of winter wheat getting sown in England. Fertiliser prices are also a topic of conversation, with growers wondering if this is now the time to buy for 2024. EFA areas for next year have also been planned out for some farmers as they finish AECS contract agreements and utilise previous AECS Grass margins for EFA Margins. Now seems to be the time to plan ahead.

KINCARDINSHIRE

Ground conditions in the area, although very wet, are beginning to dry after a windier few days. Very little winter ploughing is being done at the moment. Winter cereals that were sown early are generally looking well, although very few fields do not have a washed-out area within them. Later sown crops are very variable. Those only just sown around when the rain came are looking very patchy. Those sown after the rain (which are very few) are just emerging. Decisions will have to be made come spring whether fields will remain in winter cereals or not. In contrast most winter oilseed rape is looking well with some strong crops for the time of year. There is still lots of water standing in fields and there will definitely be more spring cropping in the area due to land after mainly potatoes not being sown.

PERTSHIRE

Crop establishment varies across the area with some good crops and some poor crops and some which never made it out of the bag. A few more acres of crops have been drilled within the last month (after a cold spell at the start of the month) which is slowly germinating. Winter barley, which doesn't like wet feet, has suffered the most from the wet weather but many fields of cereals with low lying areas have patches which have rotted out which will need a decision made as to patch up, enter into EFA or to pull down the field average.

FORFAR

A rare few dry days in a row has made things look a little more promising but in general winter oilseed rape looks okay going into the winter, some of which is receiving propyzamide herbicide as pre-emergence herbicide were missed. Many winter cereals have low lying areas which have rotted out or have washed out areas across the fields and don't look great at all. There is a fair bit of land which was planned to be sown to wheat, particularly after potatoes, which has not been drilled. Many fields will need to be walked in the new year and a decision made as to stick with the winter crop or start again with a spring crop. Winter ploughing is well behind more typical years although a few have made a start in lighter areas.

FIFE

The wheat, barley and winter oilseed rape that are not still under water are looking remarkably green for having had their feet wet for so long! Some wheat was sown 10 days ago when there was a couple of frosty days but most wheat is around 3 leaf with the earliest sown at GS22. Winter barleys, unless washed out or rotted due to being submerged for over a month, are around GS23/24. Winter oilseed rape fields are mostly showing 8 or 9 leaves, luckily with only low levels of light leaf spot (no chance of spraying due to ground and weather conditions). There are quite a number of farms that have not got their total planned area of wheat sown, some plan on waiting to see what late January early February brings in the way of weather, they may sow then if ground conditions allow. Reports from Englandshire of large areas of normally wheat ground, being unsown and probably going into spring barley, are making growers up here nervous about spring barley value come harvest 2024.

LOTHIANS

Many regions across the Lothians had in excess of 150mm of rain in October and between 50 and 100mm of rain in November. The first two weeks of December has already seen rainfall levels exceed November's totals, particularly in western areas. Soils are either at or beyond field capacity with waterlogging evident and ditches full across the region. Partial crop loss within fields is evident and will continue to occur where crops remain submerged. Earlier sown autumn cereals are in general however robust in terms of crop development, the later sown crops have by contrast been slow to develop, with cold temperatures predominating for much of the last 6 weeks. Disease levels in autumn sown crops are lower than in 2022 with the exception perhaps of light leaf spot in oilseed rape. BYDV risk in cereals is perceived lower than that seen in 2022 again due to lower temperatures. Slug damage to cereal crops has in general been superficial this autumn. Field preparation for spring sowing has all but been abandoned and straw bales remain in individual fields and will stay there until the ground dries out. Winter vegetable lifting is understandably proving difficult and challenging.

STIRLING

There have been a few frosts since the last crop update and there was a worry with later sown winter cereals (some of which now are only at (GS12) 2nd leaf unfolded) that frost heave/damage would be an issue. However, crops appear to be fine, the most advanced crops in the area have first tiller noticeable (GS21). Heavy rainfall in the last few days has resulted in some standing water on most flat fields, yet today after a break in the weather the damage for most crops is not as bad as feared. Slugs are more noticeable, but below thresholds so no need for a molluscicide just now but farmers should confirm this with their own set of traps. The weeds such as couch grass and volunteers have a strong presence in some crops with the burden greater on lower till crops. Update on the disease front for cereal crops is that most crops are looking healthy with good root establishment and clean leaves overall. Oilseed rape is also looking good and clean across the region with ploughed crops looking superior and at a higher growth stage compared to those directly sown around the same time. Ploughed crops are at (GS1,8) and min tilled at (GS 1,5).

BORDERS

With 82mm of rain so far this month winter crops are in the main looking remarkable well. Winter barley that doesn't usually like wet feet is surviving through this wet weather. Oilseed rape where not capped by heavy rain after establishment in early autumn is continuing to grow. Bare patches in some fields are allowing crows to land and feed. A decision will need to be taken early next year as to whether to leave or resow. There are reports of later sown fields and areas with prolonged spells underwater where seed or plants have rotted out and will need re-sown. It is difficult to put a number on this but something in the order of 5% of the later sown wheat acreage is affected this way. There are fields of wheat that did not get sown and these growers are hoping for a window in the spring to still sow that wheat. Most would prefer to do this than move to spring cereals and seed is scarce anyway.

AYRSHIRE

Fortunately, the fields in the south west are fairing up ok and for an area used to rain the perception is that it hasn't been any wetter than any other year. There hasn't been too much flooding. Winter crops are all in the ground, up through and generally looking well, with no comments on problem fields from farmers.