

Inta-Ag Mag

APRIL 2021



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Unintentional Barriers

Registrations and their impacts on U.S. potato exports

Country-specific MRL standards are effectively becoming trade obstacles, and that need to ensure countries are making sciencebased MRL decisions.

At the Eye on Potatoes podcast studio set up on the trade show floor of Potato Expo 2020 in Las Vegas, our host Lane Nordlund and I were pleased to be joined by Rachel Lattimore, senior vice president and general counsel of CropLife America, and Matt Lantz, the potato industry's go-to trade expert at Bryant Christie, for a great conversation on some of the regulatory impediments to free trade.

While tariffs are popularly viewed as the largest restraint on exports, we in agriculture know that regulations involving pest and disease issues or the application of crop protection tools can create some of the most onerous roadblocks.

That's why we recorded Eye On Potatoes Episode 5: "Registrations and Their Impacts on U.S. Potato Exports": to take a deep dive on the challenging topic of disharmonized international maximum residue levels (MRLs) for pesticides. The podcast episode looks at how foreign countries' differing standards are affecting potato trade and can hinder growers' choices when seeking to grow healthy crops.

A conversation on crop protection tools can't be complete without the input of CropLife America. They are the leading experts in Washington, D.C., in helping the growing community both domestically and internationally with important crop protection and pesticide issues. CropLife advocates for policies and regulations to allow U.S. farmers to have the tools they need to grow and market their crops.

Despite what the public is being told by anti-pesticide advocates, growers need access to crop protection tools in order to grow a healthy crop. And when growers follow the label, the residues will be under the MRL—a standard that ensures the product was applied correctly.

On the podcast, Lantz recalls that when he started his career 20 years ago, MRLs were not an issue in trade. "What has happened as the world has developed [is that] countries are overhauling their food safety regulations," he says. "As part of that,

POTATO GROWER APRIL 2020
KAM QUARLES, CEO,
NATIONAL POTATO COUNCIL
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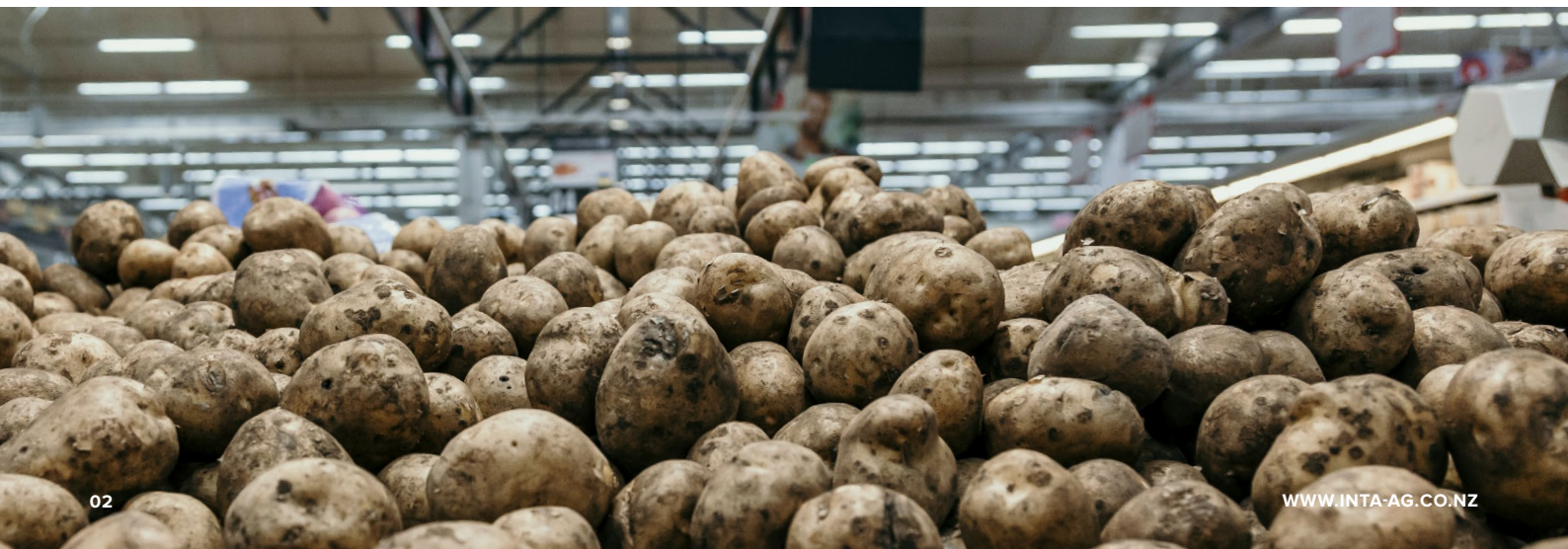
they say we can no longer just simply defer to an exporting country MRL list or the international CODEX list. They say we need to have our own list."

As a result, unfortunately for growers, today many nations have their own unique MRL lists, with their own rules, standards and regulations. How is that a problem for growers? If a registrant doesn't have its standards and MRLs approved by that importing country, a grower can properly apply a crop protection tool according to the EPA label, ship that product abroad, and—if the registrant doesn't have a standard in place—that product can be kicked back at the cost of tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars.

While MRLs might not be an intentional trade barrier, Lattimore argues that country-specific MRL standards are effectively becoming trade obstacles and that we need to ensure countries are making science-based MRL decisions.

The NPC and our partners in the U.S. potato industry have been working together to address these challenges by getting scientifically sound MRL agreements in place so growers have the products they need to grow healthy crops and feed the world.

For more insight into the impact of MRLs on the potato industry, subscribe to the NPC's new Eye on Potatoes podcast, available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts. ♦



Wildflowers could cut aphid-spread viruses in potatoes

FARMERS WEEKLY UK
2 OCTOBER 2020

Wildflowers grown in strips through potato crops could control disease-carrying aphids and may help growers faced with a dwindling number of insecticides.

Areas of wildflowers grown in the headlands and between tramlines of crops have been shown to attract the natural enemies of aphids – namely hoverflies, lacewings and ladybirds.

Scottish Agronomy, the crop consultant group, has been trialling this technique to help growers cope with the banning of some insecticides and increased aphid resistance to others.

The level of the main damaging potato virus Y, strain N (PVYn), is now at the highest level in seed potato crops for 20 years, highlighting the need for new methods of aphid control.

Eric Anderson, senior agronomist at the group, says both ware and, more importantly, seed potato producers are looking ahead to when fewer effective insecticides are likely to be available.

“The vision is to cut back on insecticides and growers recognise that some insecticides will not be available in the long term,” he says.

CHEMICAL CONTROL

Pyrethroid insecticides are currently under review by regulators, while some aphids are becoming resistant or have shown a shift in sensitivity to these products.

Meanwhile, systemics such as acetamiprid (Insyst) and flonicamid (Teppeki) have a limited number of applications allowed in seed potato crops, and restrictions could tighten further.

Even though Scottish seed potato crops only grow above ground for eight to 10 weeks, control of aphids is vital for the health of the seed and the viability of the whole industry.

Mr Anderson has trialled the technique of growing wild flower mixes on the headlands, either in 3m strips every tramline width or every other tramline width.

This creates corridors through the crop and more diversity, in a move away from a more monoculture system with its high reliance on chemical controls.

WILDFLOWER MIXES

Mr Anderson's work has identified species such as cornflower, common vetch and yarrow as good homes for aphid enemies to be reared, and these wild flowers are at a low growing height to fit in with the potato crops.

He is still refining which species should be sown and sowing dates, and hopes this may allow growers to cut back on their insecticide use in the future.

The potential virus problem in potatoes is further exacerbated by the withdrawal of diquat (Reglone) as a desiccant. This means that crop haulm stays greener for longer, so is more at risk from regrowth and late season aphid-spread viruses.

Research work in Switzerland, conducted by Matthias Tschumi, found wildflower strips to be highly effective in attracting the enemies of aphids and in decreasing aphid densities.

Of the three natural enemies, hoverflies showed the biggest increase in numbers in the strips compared with surrounding potatoes, while lacewings and ladybirds were also up sharply.

LAG PERIOD

Mr Anderson points out that there can be a lag period until natural enemies have time to build up their numbers. Therefore, there is potential for integrated pest management (IPM) using both traditional and modern tools to control aphids.

This approach is being investigated at the AHDB seed potato farm at Morpeth, north of Montrose, and it is hoped the wider adoption of IPM will improve PVYn control while reducing insecticide use.

The virus health of Scottish seed potatoes is a unique selling point in Britain and around the world. However, the amount of virus in crops increased significantly during both 2019 and 2020, with the highest level of mosaics recorded in more than 20 years.

The main virus of concern is PVY and the main strain is now PVYn, with peach-potato aphid (*Myzus persicae*) considered the most efficient vector of the virus. The virus can cause significant direct yield losses, tuber blemishes and cracking. Potato leaf roll virus has also increased, albeit from a very low base. ♦

Apps to enhance your business

FARMERS WEEKLY UK
2 OCTOBER 2020

1. AHDB VARIETY TOOL FREE

The new AHDB Recommended List online tool provides growers with an interactive way to sift through the many crop varieties on offer to identify the most suitable cultivars for their farm.

The online tool enables growers to select varieties that meet their individual criteria, such as protein content, and make comparisons of specific disease resistance and lodging ratings, while investigating regional performance and yield consistency.

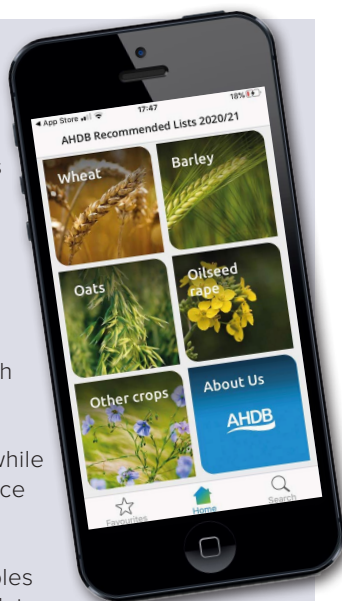
AHDB research data analyst Bastiaan Brak says the tool enables growers to extract and analyse data easily, allowing them to make informed decisions based on the varieties' yield and genetic performance.

At the heart of the tool is a new agronomic merit feature, which calculates the genetic potential of varieties for their different disease and lodging resistances.

The feature works by allocating a "weighting" importance to disease resistance and standing ability factors, where the variety's overall agronomic score is calculated and displayed on a graph against yield.

Information on a variety's yield consistency across different seasons and regions is also accessible, which is something many growers will rate highly when selecting varieties.

How a variety responds to fungicides can also be compared using the "treatment benefit" option, which looks at both treated and untreated trial data.



2. SKIPPY SCOUT £30/MONTH

This unique app uses drone imagery to enable growers to identify wheat diseases up to five times faster than conventional crop walking.

Developed by technology pioneer firm Drone Ag, Skippy Scout aims to pinpoint diseases such as yellow rust and Septoria tritici earlier in a crop's development.

The company's founder, Jack Wrangham, says the app offers farmers and agronomists an opportunity to identify diseases more rapidly to prevent yield losses and improve quality.

"In minutes, a drone can take detailed images of multiple points in a field to identify early signs of common crop diseases, which is then sent to the user's phone in real time," he says.

Images are then used to identify the extent to which disease is affecting leaves, which can be shared with agronomists between visits, enabling users to follow a crop's development more closely.

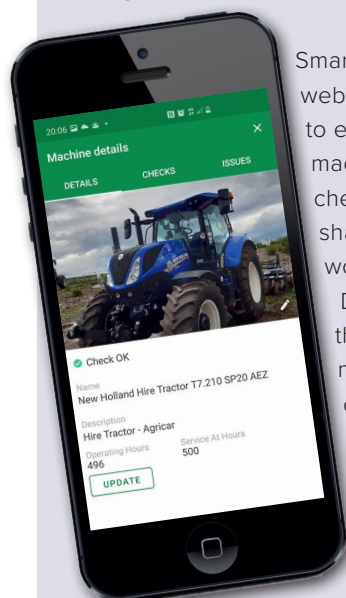
In addition to high-resolution images, the company is also developing artificial intelligence to interpret drone images, which will inform app users of what type of disease is potentially present.





3. SMART FARMER

FREE SEVEN-DAY TRIAL | £495/YEAR (+VAT)



Smart Farmer is a mobile- and web-based app that allows operators to ensure safe and well-maintained machinery, by recording pre-start checks online, which can be shared across the farm to all the workforce.

Developed by Marc Skivington, the app aims to provide a simple method to ensure the safe and optimum use of farm machinery, by creating a safe work environment.

The tool uses a unique traffic-light system to show the state of machinery, with an easy-to-understand indicator of the

machine's status.

Previous checks are instantly presented to users so they know the current state of the machine, with the app using QR codes to quickly identify machines.

This allows the operator to identify which machines are in use today and by who, with any potential issues being flagged up that require attention before the machine can be used.

In the event of an incident, the app can provide reports to show routine pre-start checks that were carried out in line with current industry standards.

4. CALIBRATION WIZARD FREE



The Calibration Wizard app aims to improve accuracy of slug pellet applications, allowing operators to effectively set up uniform and precise pellet doses.

Developed by slug pellet manufacturer Certis, in partnership with SCS Spreader and Sprayer Testing, it reduces the time taken to calibrate equipment.

Users can enter information on their pellet product, applicator type, spread width and target application rate to generate data on optimal spread performance.

The tool recommends disc speed, feed rotor settings and aperture settings, along with expected bait point density, to provide operators with accurate applications.

The farm map on the app can pinpoint awkward field corners, where crop production is difficult and advise planting trees in these areas, and also detect where seed-bearing crops for winter bird food can be grown.

The idea is to model all data into weighted maps, showing suitability for the different environmental options, and present the results on a farm scale in the web-based tool.

These maps will be of the same resolution as those for precision farming systems used for variable input rate applications.

Users can simply click on their farm to see a map relating to the four parameters, with areas shaded from blue for the least likely to succeed, through to orange and red for the most suitable.





Potato industry works together towards emergency approval for sprout suppressant

POTATO REVIEW UK | JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

An emergency authorisation for sprout suppressant, 1,4-DMN, has been approved, for storage of processing potatoes between April and July, with restrictions on volumes treated and feeding treated crops to animals. It's welcome news for the crisping sector which has been hit hard by CIPC withdrawal, as other approved sprout suppressants have been less effective at higher storage temperatures.

Although a first application for full approval for the new sprout suppressant 1,4-DMN was submitted by approval holders DormFresh in March, it was informed in May 2020 that it was highly unlikely that the application would lead to an authorisation for use this season. Given the use-up date for CIPC of October 8th 2020, the processing industry in particular felt that, without 1,4-DMN, it would be facing a serious threat to the continuity of supply from long-term storage.

Following Defra's advice, work started on an application for Emergency Authorisation for 1,4-DMN. It was submitted by AHDB in July 2020.

VARIOUS STAGES AND SUBMISSIONS FOR EMERGENCY APPROVAL

A combined effort, led by industry bodies including the AHDB, the Potato Processors' Association (PPA), British Potato Trade Association (BPTA), the NFU and the Fresh Potato Suppliers Association (FPSA), has successfully filed for an Emergency Authorisation for the application of 1,4-DMN (1,4-Dimethylnaphthalene which is marketed as 1,4SIGHT).

1,4-DMN is vitally important to the industry because of its ability to control sprouting

including in long-term storage for processing, which is the key reason why the Emergency Authorisation was requested.

The potato supply chain has been drawing the British Government's attention to the importance of good sprout suppression for more than three years. Despite this, the active ingredient chlorpropham (CIPC), which allowed potatoes to be successfully stored year-round, did not have its EU approval renewed.

The loss of this cost-effective active, which had been widely used for more than 60 years,

has left a huge hole in British growers' sprout control toolbox.

While the AHDB worked to coordinate the application, PPA Director General Andrew Curtis and partner organisations continued to stress the importance of the issue to government ministers and departments, and NFU President Minette Batters drew the attention of the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser to Defra to ongoing problems with applications for emergency authorisations of crop protection products, including for 1,4-DMN.

To support the Emergency Authorisation, the AHDB and the PPA pooled evidence to demonstrate industry need for the active and that other alternatives to CIPC would not be as effective for long term storage of processing stocks. Based upon AHDB and industry data, PPA developed an impact assessment around a series of 'what-if' scenarios. These included worst case situations which assumed

authorisation was not granted, as well as reviewing the impact that a livestock feeding ban would have on the sector.

Knowing that CIPC would not be available for the 2020/21 storage season, the campaign kicked-off in earnest in January 2020, with a forum held at Fera's premises in York attended by Defra and CRD staff, jointly hosted by the PPA and the Fresh Potato Suppliers Association (FPSA), and attended by growers such as Tim Rooke. Threats to the industry were highlighted to the audience in a number of presentations, with the aim of building their understanding of the situation.

This was followed up with visits to a number of stores varying from modern, well-sealed ones with good ventilation to older, less efficient ones.

AHDB Crop protection senior scientist: Pesticide Regulation, Joe Martin, said: "We ensured that requests for more information, such as additional information on the stewardship programme, and mechanisms for limiting the number of potatoes treated with 1,4DMN were answered as quickly as possible. We were also asked questions regarding Red Tractor Assured Food Standards."

Some of the questions were at very short notice, but, given the urgency of the situation, all different stakeholders pulled together to ensure CRD had the relevant information to present to its Expert Committee on Pesticides (ECP), he added.

Andrew said the original scenarios identified that around 750,000 tonnes of potatoes across mid and late storage would ideally need to be treated with 1,4-DMN. However, the nature of Emergency Authorisations (which the regulation states should be for "limited and controlled use") meant that such a high volume would not receive approval. Such authorisations are usually to address acute problems for minor crops, rather than a large and important sector such as potatoes.

Andrew said: "As we moved forward with the application, the regulator deemed that the use of 1,4-DMN on even 10% of the UK crop production was still not considered to be limited enough.

"As a result we had to work with AHDB to evaluate, based upon the available evidence from their trials and other sources, which were the varieties with the worst problems amongst those destined for late storage presented the greatest risk, and as result the final submission was for approval for use on a much more limited 196,000 tonnes."



COLLABORATION BETWEEN SUPPLY CHAIN MEMBERS

Collaborating with other growers and supply chain representatives in the request for emergency approval for DMN is Tim Rooke, Vice Chairman of the NFU potato forum who grows potatoes for crisping and also supplies McCain Foods.

Tim grows around 240 ha of potatoes, two thirds of which are for crisping while the others are for chipping, he is reliant on long term storage often reaching into May or June so his customers have a steady and reliable supply throughout the year.

He, alongside other growers and members of the supply chain, had written to their MPs, about the problems the sector is facing since the withdrawal of CIPC, and in January 2020 attended the meeting with the regulators at York.

"It was a collaborative event that included everyone from agronomists and crop advisers to the processors," he said. "We also took them out and showed them around stores and explained why approval is so important for the sector and to help them understand the impacts of losing a chemical for which there is no direct replacement."

Although ethylene and mint oil have approval for use as sprout suppressants, and they work for potatoes in cold stores destined for the fresh-pack sector, where the tubers are more dormant, they are not effective on processing potatoes. This is a huge headache for growers like Tim.

"Chipping and crisping potatoes have to be held at ambient temperatures of 8-9deg.C

to maintain fry colours. As a result, the tubers are not as dormant as they are at cooler temperatures," he said. "The approved alternative sprout suppressants are poorly suited to processing storage. Ethylene can cause the sugars to spike at the warmer temperatures. These sugar spikes result in a darker fry colour which is unacceptable to the processors."

Blanching the potatoes to whiten the colour after a sugar spike may be a solution for French fry processing but it is not an option for crisping manufacture because it changes the texture.

The other approved alternative, spearmint oil, despite having clearance for processing potatoes, had performed poorly in research done in stores at the higher range of temperatures such as 8-10deg.C over long term storage.

He emphasises the difficult situation that the sector is in, which will become even worse as the storage season goes on.

"We followed the advice of AHDB and applied maleic hydrazide in the field before harvesting. The chemical is perhaps better known for controlling volunteers, but can help prevent sprouting and research has shown it to be a successful pre-treatment for the other alternatives.

"This will take us through until early in the New Year, but after that we will be stepping into the unknown. That's why the industry needs solutions such as the emergency approval of DMN."

This covered a number of crisping varieties and also two particular chipping varieties which were found to be particularly at risk, all destined for storage beyond the end of March 2021.

"We also are grateful for the support of the FPSA and BPTA who worked as part of the team, supporting the processing sector, while recognising that their challenge was not as acute as for the processing sector and that there would be no emergency approval for the fresh-pack and fresh chipping sectors."

The final application was submitted by the AHDB at the end of July, and was intended for the ECP meeting on September 22nd. In parallel, in early September, contact was made with Prof Gideon Henderson, the Chief Scientific Advisor for Defra, by NFU President, Minette Batters. This underscored the need to support UK growers with emergency approvals where necessary, and included the case of 1,4-DMN.

However, despite these actions and a letter co-signed by BPTA, FPSA and PPA, being sent to the Minister for Farming Fisheries and Food, Victoria Prentis, emphasising the urgency of the matter - and her assurance it would be attended to as soon as possible - the application was not considered at the September meeting. As the next meeting of the ECP was not until November 24th, work behind the scenes continued.

"One of the challenges of getting the application before the ECP committee is that it does not publish an agenda online until the last moment, so applicants cannot see whether it will be discussed," said Andrew.

Adrian Cunningham, Head of Crop Storage at AHDB, is hopeful the emergency authorisation of 1,4 DMN for this season will lead to its full approval as an option for the whole industry in 2021/22. But this will still be dependent on the full application from DormFresh receiving clearance by next summer.

"If DMN gets approved, this will boost our portfolio of options significantly, particularly for long-term storage. Alongside the current options, plus with the advent of some other new molecules expected onto the market very soon, including orange oil, growers will be in a much better place to manage their stores going forward," he said.

"But it is important to realise that all of this new chemistry needs to be used as part of a wider strategy of integrated store management. All the products work differently to CIPC and need to be managed more precisely that was necessary before."

1,4DMN AN EFFECTIVE SPROUT SUPPRESSANT

Sutton Bridge Crop Storage Research researcher Adrian Briddon, who has been directing trials investigating the efficacy of the product, talks about some of the technical details of 1,4-DMN- and how to get the most from it.

He said: "1,4-DMN has been approved for a few years in a number of European countries – including the Netherlands – and has been shown to be very effective as a sprout suppressant.

"Our work at SBCSR has shown the product works at all stages of dormancy. While it is called a dormancy enhancer, and it is best applied before dormancy break, it is also a very effective sprout suppressant applied to non-dormant crops in store. This is where it will be valuable at the end of the season, now we have secured the emergency approval, especially for long-term crisping crops.

For applications to be most effective, he recommends stores should be full. This is because 1,4-DMN forms a vapour in the store

atmosphere and so large, unnecessary air spaces dilute the treatment.

"Stores should be sealed for application for 48 hours to improve the uptake of 1,4-DMN vapour from the store atmosphere, into the tubers," he explains, adding that 1,4-DMN should be recirculated for a short period of around 15 minutes after application.

The extended store closure period means that application will need to be with electric or heat exchange hot foggers, rather than the petrol ones which were often used for CIPC.

"1,4-DMN is more dynamic than CIPC, and it needs greater attention to detail. Being volatile, the product will be lost from the store at a greater rate than non-volatile CIPC.

"Store managers will need to inspect crops regularly to see when re-application is necessary. All other things being equal, this is likely to be before CIPC would have been re-applied.

"We understand that if it is approved, the full label rate is likely to be 120ml/t. Such volumes are not often used though; 60ml/tonne is more usual." ♦



Adrian Briddon AHDB



Minette Batters



Tim Rooke



Andrew Curtis



Victoria Prentis

Mothers Day at Inta-Ag is back!

Join Alison and Lyn in conjunction with Danyelle-Maire from the Sugar Box where we would like to treat you to a decadent morning of cupcake decorating topped off with a beautiful High Tea.

May 5th
Franklin Centre Pukekohe
10am – 1pm

Don't forget! Book now! Numbers are very limited
If you'd like to attend please let Alison or Lyn know asap.



New ScanStone machines prove to be a cost-saving option

POTATO REVIEW UK JULY/AUGUST 2020

William and Alison Skea from ScanStone visited Fairlie Fresh, to find out how James Fairlie and his father Ian got on with two new 5 Webber destoners after an uninterrupted season.

Coming away from 3 machines, Fairlie Fresh has made a saving while achieving the same output. James and Ian, who run a farm at Kirkton of Monikie, said the machines were

easy to pull with their two John Deere 6215R tractors, and no boost required. They worked uphill and downhill and covered area their previous machines couldn't. The extra 5th drop meant some areas did not need to be bed tilled.

The destoner followed the ridges left by their Chateau bed former perfectly, and the intake disks were perfectly placed to pick up all the soil, while missing stones. The wheels of the destoner also fitted well into the ridges

and prevented the destoner wandering. The flatter bed was advantageous in a dry year as it kept in moisture, while offering an even intake and wear across the width of the destoner. The wider steeper bed left by the chateau ploughs meant the destoner could work less deep and achieve a good amount of soil behind the bed.

The soft drive which acted as a shock absorber on the road and reduced strain on the tractor and machine. On a journey to land 60 miles away, the wheel hub temperature remained normal.

The bigger 405 R24 wheels fitted the rows perfectly. The 8-stud upgraded drawbar with pick-up hook, meant hitching to and from the tractor was effortless. With the increased steering angle on the new 5 Webber, manoeuvrability was simple. The new control system on the ScanStone is designed, programmed and built in-house.

www.scanstone.co.uk





Why we still need migrant workers

THE VEGETABLE FARMER UK JANUARY 2021

In the final hearing of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee of MPs' inquiry into labour in the food supply chain, in November, it was made abundantly clear from ministers present that growers will be expected to look in future for more of their seasonal workers from within the UK.

It's true many thousands of shop staff unfortunately could be seeking new employment in the spring. But growers whose 2020 recruitment experiences were published by the inquiry in late autumn suggest finding willing hands for field work far from urban centres will still be no easy task.

At the start of 2020 G's Fresh planned for a seasonal labour force of 3,620. In March, as 'lockdowns' began to bite across Europe, it set up its own 'Feed the nation' campaign to attract UK workers. In a normal year, between 10 and 30 would fill seasonal jobs at the company. The campaign generated 2,500 responses, few having experience of working in agriculture, manual work, or piecework. But 90 had already joined by April and 500 were taken on over the course of the year.

"We spent around £1,000 per person providing them with special training for the demands of harvest work," G's said. "Despite this, their productivity was 60% that of comparable labour from Eastern Europe and the percentage of early leavers double that of our other workers."

Numbers of candidates remained strong throughout but depended on location. Around 13% of British workers took up the offer of on-site accommodation. Maintaining required productivity rates was a constant challenge. "We introduced incentive bonuses and provided further coaching, training and support to help them believe they could do it," it said.

In their first full week the British crews' productivity was comparable to any other new crew but was not sustained - their productivity level dropped so it was as much as 50% lower than comparable crews from the EU or seasonal workers pilot scheme. "British teams continued

to need additional motivation and performance management in an attempt to improve performance to an acceptable level, but week-on-week improvements never materialised."

On average G's best non-UK harvest crews earn around £13 per hour; last year the UK crews were earning around £5 so G's had to make up their pay by an additional £3.90 per hour to meet the national living wage.

G's early crops were the most affected by the lower productivity levels, due to the lack of good candidates at the start of the season. "Crops harvested later, such as celery, benefited from people recruited through the seasonal workers pilot scheme who were of a much higher calibre," it said.

The turnover rate of workers from the pilot was also significantly lower, which contributed to the better productivity.

G's said it had initially been committed to maintaining the number of UK workers it had taken on, replacing leavers using its UK recruitment campaign. But performance statistics began to indicate this was 'not a viable strategy' so the company then looked to replace any unexpected turnover with workers from the EU or seasonal workers pilot once they started to become available.

Even the turnover of EU workers was 11 % more than in 2019 and there were fewer experienced returnee lead workers which made training of new people more challenging, while strict Covid-19 controls also led to workers looking for alternative jobs in other sectors.

In the end, the company says, it recruited enough harvest labour by replacing British early leavers with people from the seasonal workers pilot. "Without them at the height of our season we would have been unable to fulfil customer orders," said G's. "The performance statistics, calibre and potential of Ukrainians [from the scheme] far exceeded those from Bulgaria, Romania and UK."

Riviera Produce managing director David Simmons said the company was "very enthusiastic about giving local people a chance."

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Riviera Produce managing director David Simmons said the company was "very enthusiastic about giving local people a chance."

Manual labour's not the job it used to be

FARMERS WEEKLY UK | 4 DECEMBER 2020

Feeling a twinge of nostalgia - or maybe it's just lower back pain - Charlie Flindt ponders some of the tasks around the farm that machinery has done away with



Twice a year my old Hyundai Terracan gets a good wash – if it's lucky.

Once for the MOT in June, in the hope that the testers will look more kindly on it if they can actually see what they're supposed to be inspecting, and once in the run-up to Christmas, when it becomes a kind of ceremony to celebrate the end of the busy arable haul.

Of course, the last couple of years have turned into a "when will we finish the long arable haul?" – but it's still therapeutic to walk slowly round with a hose and a stiff brush, and then a bucket of warm car shampoo.

The green and silver two-tone reappears from under the thick layer of mud, while assorted harvest calculations, random phone numbers and dodgy van registrations – finger-written hastily on to dirty windows and panels – vanish forever.

I was just reaching the last stage the other day – only alloys and wheel arches to do – when I realised I was being watched.

WAX ON

It was one of the teenagers from down the road, out on his bike, and leaning over the silver gates, obviously angling for a chat. My lower back was all in favour of a break, so I dropped my sponge in to the Wash'n'Wax and ambled over.

He was keen to know all about the parked-up farm kit, what it was and what it did. He asked about our sheep and cattle plans for the winter, and when lambing might start.

I asked how school was going. "We've all been sent home 'cos of the virus," he said. "And I'm bored with video games." Good lad.

I said it seemed odd to send children home; I dimly remember an animal health lecture where we were told of the importance of piling young animals into a barn to ensure they caught everything and got herd immunity.

"Have you got any jobs I could do?" he asked. Blimey. I had to stop and think for a minute. Well, anything involving a tractor is out.

The days of jumping on a Super Major with no brakes and sloppy steering joints as soon as we could reach the pedals and heading off down the lane in a cloud of face-level fumes are well gone.

Mind you, if he's bored with video games, he can try and sort out the incomprehensible gearbox on my newish Massey loader tractor. But it would be more than my life's worth to let him drive it.

WAX OFF

What about manual jobs? We just don't do them anymore, and I have to say that my lower back is very grateful for it.

We don't carry hundredweight bags, or shovel shit, or throw silage over a fence to hungry calves with a prong, or a grape, or a fork. And I miss the arguments about what it was actually called.

Sweeping out the corners of grain store floors is about the limit of manual labour these days – and even that's a job not to be taken lightly in the frantic heat of harvest. As Neighbour Robert once put it: "If I can't do it from a tractor cab, I don't do it!"

But what do you say to an enthusiastic youngster? "I can't think of anything at the moment, but I'll give you a shout if something comes up," was the best I could come up with. He seemed OK with that, and we went our separate ways.

"Hold on," I said. "You could come and do these wheel arches..." But he was already halfway home on his bike. Smart kid. ♦

