

Milder autumn weather makes it vital to take out weeds early



## Survey confirms most difficult weeds to control

Growers find black-grass, crane's bill, cleavers and charlock the most difficult weeds to control in oilseed rape, reveals a survey of 300 growers.

Some 25% of growers said black-grass was most difficult to control and the one for which they were least satisfied with the current levels of control achieved, according to the study by BASF.

The next most difficult weeds to control were cleavers, crane's-bill (*Geranium* species), charlock and thistles, which were all mentioned by 12-13% of growers. These top five were followed by poppy, cited by 17% of oilseed rape growers.

Paul Rawson, BASF oilseed rape product manager, said it was vital to take out weed competition early in rape crops, as autumns were getting milder and weeds were growing more rapidly.

"Winter oilseed rape has become one of the top performers when it comes to gross margins, but in order to benefit from the buoyant market demand for oil and hence good pricing, growers will have to look to improve their rape yields further."

BASF's range of herbicides includes the basic building block Butisan S (metazachlor) which controls speedwells, chickweed, dead nettle, groundsel, mayweed, shepherd's purse, sow thistle, annual meadow grass and black-grass.

Mr Rawson acknowledged that weed control was not becoming any easier. "There are certainly some challenges that we need to overcome, but we do have a good selection of active ingredients in oilseed rape."

## Record high for black-grass dormancy

Black-grass dormancy this autumn is the highest researchers have ever seen, making reliance on a competitive crop and good herbicide choice important.

Results from HGCA-funded research have shown that only 16% of black-grass seeds across 40 different locations had germinated in 2008 compared to an average of almost 44% for the previous seven years.

The percentage of black-grass seed germinating this year was slightly lower than 2002, 2004 and 2007 – all cooler and wetter summers. In 2008, the weather has been much cooler than the long-term average with an

average number of rain days.

But high dormancy in the autumn does not necessarily mean a flush of seeds emerging in the spring. Emergence might occur when cloddy seedbeds breakdown or where soil is cultivated or moved again in the late winter or spring.

The prediction this year is that black-grass germination will be slow even with adequate seedbed moisture – unlike 2005 and 2006 where seeds had a lower dormancy and germinated readily when moisture was available.

For more on black-grass, see page 19.

# Stop trading backwards

The old adage is true – past performance is not necessarily an indication of future trends, says **Jeremy Cole**



Despite the wettest August in living memory, big wheat crops around the world have been on the cards since the satellites surveyed the world last October. Benign weather in the autumn, winter, spring and summer have all been repeatedly pointing to world oversupply of wheat in the 2008/09 season, enabling a small stock rebuilding process.

Since massive price hikes last July and August, November 2008 futures have traded from £122 in November 2007 to £160 in early March 2008, giving an ex-farm equivalent of £117-155. But only an estimated 40% of the UK wheat crop is sold.

Why is this? What price is a good price? Even the lowest of this range would have been seen as fabulous last season. The main drivers I feel are two fold: backwards trading and uncertainty.

Backwards trading is the belief that past performance indicates future trends. Prices shot up last year at harvest and early sellers were caught out. Yields were 20% down and early sellers received £100/t invoices as contracts were left unfulfilled. Again, early sellers were penalised and the result? Little forward selling.

When it comes to uncertainty, a volatile market means no-one knows what should be done for the best. Much discussion about all the different scenarios ensues but no decisions are made, again resulting in little or nothing being sold.

True, hedge funders have pumped massive amounts of cash into the commodities markets and high crude oil prices – caused in part by US traders' market manipulation – have distorted the market. But the major drivers remain supply and demand.

Since last autumn, there has been information from every source that supply was going to exceed demand for the 2008/09 season. At that point futures prices for November 2008 were £122. Today, when the actual yields are coming in, the futures market has returned to a few pounds of that price, £126.

The intervening price rises have got to be seen as froth in the market from the hedge funds and crude oil. I don't buy the argument of doing nothing if it is a passive decision in times of turmoil.

Every farmer worth his salt must have done a budget and realised, even with rising input costs that £130, £140, £150/t was making a healthy margin. From mid Dec to mid July over £140 ex farm has been possible to achieve.

Farmers should have been locking into this margin with some form of hedge. Then, if that decision was proved incorrect in the future, an extra payment would be forthcoming but an acceptable margin would have been ring fenced. Most have saved the premiums but lost two to three times that in lower grain prices. A £35/t fall on a 10t/ha crop is £350/ha margin lost. Even half of that loss would be more than most farms normal margin. It's a wicked waste.

Jeremy Cole, Bsc Agri Econ (Reading), runs *Agricole* – an independent grain brokering and marketing service for farmers. For a weekly grain market report, call 01954 719452 or visit [www.agricole.co.uk](http://www.agricole.co.uk)