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## **Arable Monitor Farm (Angus)**

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Report on 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting held 31 January 2008  
POTATO ENTERPRISE REVIEW & UPDATE

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## **TOP TIPS FROM MEETING**

**1. Calculate production costs** – All growers need to estimate the total cost involved and estimate a breakeven cost per tonne for growing potatoes. Scottish Agronomy showed figures for a 60t/ha crop with a 80% pack-out had a breakeven cost of £162 per tonne.

**2. Now experiencing blight resistance to phenylamide fungicides. Growers need to change their fungicide strategy in the coming season and avoid fungicides containing phenylamide for foliar blight control**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

A good turnout of around 28 farmers, members of the trade, and others from the agricultural sector attended the meeting at which started at Backboath then moved to Carmyllie Hall.

Programme;

- Review of potato facilities at Backboath and Slade Fm.
- James Black updated the group on what had been happening since the last meeting
- Greg Dawson, Scottish Agronomy gave a review of lessons from last season and update on potato agronomy developments
- Andrew Lamont, Albert Bartlett's described Barletts marketing group (Black's a member) and potato outlook
- Attendees then split into four groups to critically review Backboath's potato enterprise and suggests possible to improve performance

### **2. LESSONS FROM LAST SEASON AND AGRONOMY UPDATE**

**(Greg Dawson, Scottish Agronomy)**

The past year has been exceptional in many ways namely; the speed of planting, the unprecedented blight pressure mid season, dry harvest conditions no one could have realistically hoped for in July 2007, together with high yields and good prices received for the produce post harvest. Let us not underestimate that we need an improvement in price. Multiple retailers are providing deflation and cheap food to consumers but prices in 2008 and beyond need to reflect increases in the cost of production from prices rises in oil, electricity, fertiliser, agrochemicals, labour and land rental.

When indexed to 2006 values the average price per tonne paid for ware potatoes has been on a downward trend since 1970. Over that same period there have been substantial increases in production costs for growers. Figures derived by Scottish Agronomy Ltd suggest that fixed costs for producing a 60t/ha crop and cold storing it for 30 weeks are £5,178/ha. Variable costs including land rent at £865/ha totalled £2601/ha. The break-even price on this 60t/ha crop is £153/t with 85% pack-out and £162/t with 80% pack-out. A management fee for the grower of £25,000 for an 80 ha potato business adds an additional £5.21/t to the break-even price.

Increasing fertiliser costs have been driven in part by the recent increase in oil prices (particularly in relation to Ammonium Nitrate production) and partially by changes in the balance of supply and demand. Fertiliser is required to support increasing world demand for grain due to a growing world population, improving dietary expectations in Asia and India as well as demands for bio-fuel feed stocks. There have also been major technical problems that have restricted the supply of potash on to the world market.

The 2007 growing season was particularly challenging in relation to foliar blight. The extreme rainfall in June meant that travelling through crops with a sprayer was almost impossible at times. This presented major challenges in controlling the blight epidemic that started at the end of June and escalated under the humid and warm condition into the worst seen in Scotland for over fifty years. Blight of the A2 Blue 13 genotype was found in Scotland for the first time late in the 2006 season. Work carried out by SCRI with BPC funding has demonstrated that 81% of the blight samples tested from Scotland in the 2007 season contained the A2 Blue 13 genotype. This brings Scotland into line with the rest of the UK where it has been increasing rapidly in incidence since 2005. The presence of this strain has major implications for blight fungicide choice and spray intervals. The genotype is known to have a shorter latent period (period from leaf infection to spore production) than other blight genotypes in the population.

Of real concern is the increased resistance to phenylamide fungicides that was identified in blight samples tested from the BPC Fight Against Blight campaign in 2007, compared to 2006. Genetic profiling has demonstrated that phenylamide resistance was common in the A2 Blue 13 genotype that now dominates the blight population in Britain. Growers will need to change their fungicide strategy in the coming season and avoid fungicides containing phenylamide for foliar blight control. This group of fungicide products includes Fubol Gold, Tairel/Galben M and Epok that have for many years been used early in the programme during the rapid canopy expansion phase due to their systemic activity to protect new growth.

The existence of A2's alongside A1 types genotypes also creates the possibility for sexual reproduction of blight and the formation of resting spores (oospores) that can survive in the soil and provide the source of blight inoculum in the subsequent 3 to 4 years. No evidence of oospores forming a source of infection has been found in either the 2006 or 2007 BPC Blight Survey.

Despite the high levels of foliar blight in the 2007 growing crop, tuber blight has not caused many problems in stored crops. This may be due in part to the type and quantity of fungicides applied to crops in 2007 and in part to the improving conditions at the end of the season that dried out soils and aided harvesting. There is still, however, potential for blight infection to be present on tubers at a level that may not be detected at grading. This clearly has implications for seed being planted in 2008. If weather conditions are conducive, blight foci could develop shortly after crop emergence due to seed borne infection. Growers should be prepared for an early start to the fungicide programme. It is also sensible to control the growth of any foliage on potato dumps, as this has in the past been a potent source of blight inoculum.

There are many other technical, regulatory and marketing issues that will affect input choices to the potato crop in 2008 and beyond. Some of these were discussed briefly within the meeting. Growers are urged to seek appropriate advice to maximise crop productivity.

### **3. A BARTLETT'S MARKETING GROUP**

**(Andrew Lamont, Procurement Manager)**

Albert Bartlett & sons are a long established family business and one of the largest growers of root vegetables in the UK. Founded in 1948, based in Airdrie with operations in Cambridge and Boston (Lincs). Employ 1,400 staff, with 350 based at Airdrie.

#### **Review of UK potato statistics from 1960 –2007, key points:**

- Number of growers declined from 80,000 to currently 2,860, who grow an average 110 acres.
- Production relatively consistent over period at 6MT, however, area planted reduced to 122,000ha, with yields consistently improving over period
- Weekly free markets were shown for the last 7 years.

Bartlett's supply over 300,000t of potatoes and 200,000t of other root crops (carrots, onions, parsnips) per year.

Supply potatoes to all the major supermarkets, processors, wholesalers and food service. For example, supply 2/3rds of all Sainsbury's potatoes, 100% Somerfield.

Have exclusive UK Marketing agreements for 3 varieties:

- Rooster
- Osprey
- Vivaldi

Have put considerable resources to brand and promoted 'rooster' potatoes

Conduct extensive variety trials every year with over 100 varieties; taste is no. 1 factor. Also promote health and diet with all age groups.

#### **Ware Marketing Group**

Have 60 Scottish growers in their marketing group mostly in Angus, Fife and Borders – the Monitor Farm are a member of the Group and market all their ware through Bartlett's.

Generally look to market 100% of member's ware crop. Growers have support of technical team.

A key feature of the system is QC done on farm to ensure farm quality is known and no surprises at the pack house.

Growers paid on weight of potatoes at arrival at pack house. Airdrie handles 1,000t per day with up to 50 different product lines.

Need to provide fresh potatoes 52 weeks a year (a real challenge) so work closely with growers to ensure constant supply.

Average pick-off in the pack house approx 70%, market the balance to processors (7% stock feed).

### **Advantage of being a member of the Group?**

- ❑ Full marketing service – takes hassle away from growers
- ❑ Access to expanding market
- ❑ Market the whole crop
- ❑ Feedback and flow information – varieties, etc
- ❑ Financial security
- ❑ Technical support

### **Potato Market Outlook**

Currently all main line varieties are £180 / tonne.

Future prospects are good. Confident all good material will be needed. Poor samples always harder to place. Crop utilisation is good although wastage is slightly up. Prices for stockfeed higher this season.

## **4. GROUP WORK - REVIEW OF BACKBOATH'S POTATO ENTERPRISE**

### **Summary of feedback from the Groups**

<b><u>STRENGTHS</u></b>	<b><u>WEAKNESSES</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Large scale – grow 235ac</li><li>• 4,000t refrigerated stores - established at a low cost</li><li>• Black's knowledge &amp; experience</li><li>• Member Bartlett's Ware Group</li><li>• Good tattie machinery</li><li>• Ability to irrigate all the land</li><li>• Pre-warming prior to grading</li><li>• Dual crop M. Piper</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Competition for clean tattie land</li><li>• Split site – lot of carting for grading</li><li>• Poor Cashflow – late marketing</li><li>• Grading line needing updating</li><li>• Warming shed limited capacity</li><li>• Cold store costs – efficiency?</li><li>• Premium for storing crop in cold store late – uncertain</li><li>• Hire boxes or own?</li><li>• Labour availability</li><li>• How fund capital investment?</li><li>• Logistic of growing tatties over wide area</li></ul>

### **Groups suggestions on how to possibly improve the tattie enterprise**

1. Consider location of grading line (Slade ?)
2. Can the cost of running the cold stores be improved? - split the shed
3. Scope to improve enterprise information to support decision making
4. Consider opportunities for renewable energy e.g. wind turbine
5. Look for alliances opportunities with other local growers
6. Field analysis to reduce risk of powdery scab, etc
7. Look for new markets / varieties
8. Check enterprise profitability / margins - alternative is to rent out land
9. Try get rented land closer

## **5. DATE NEXT MEETING - Friday 7<sup>th</sup> March**