MAIZE matters

making a profit from maize

In association with KWS

Growers have struggled with a difficult season for maize and while it may not prove to be a bumper year, industry pundits believe there is still a good chance most crops will achieve reasonable yields and quality.

Plant genetics' role in challenging year

The cold, wet weather has affected both early and late-sown crops across the varietal spectrum. In 2011, most crops were showing tasselling by early July. By contrast this year, a high percentage had failed to reach this stage by the beginning of August.

Mike Corp, of Procam's Chemega, points out a similar growing season a decade ago would have been labelled a disaster in some parts of the country.

"Plant breeders have made rapid genetic progress over the past 10 years, and their efforts have paid off. Most of the newer varieties are better equipped to withstand stress caused by cold and wet conditions, and this has been a very challenging year.

Winter feeding

"A minority of crops have had to be ploughed in to make way for additional grass to boost volume in the clamp, ahead of the winter livestock feeding period. However in general terms, all is not lost and we should see some acceptable results at harvest."

It could be argued early-maturing varieties are a safer bet, if volatile weather patterns are to become the norm, he adds.

"Early-maturing varieties have the opportunity to use the light and heat units available over a longer period, which means they produce a better quality cob with a higher feed value. They used to be associated with relatively low yields, but that is no longer the case. Kougar falls into the early-maturity category, but has high yields, as well as scoring highly on digestibility.

"The ultra-early variety, Severus would be another example; it is capable of yields up to 18 tonnes/ha of dry matter and has a high starch and ME content. It romped ahead of its rivals in our trial plots soon after emergence and continues to look very pleasing to the eye."

Producers who expect high performance levels from their livestock but have below-average maize crops in the ground have been proactive in securing their winter forage stocks, says Mole Avon's Andrew Stone.

Targets

"Some of our clients – particularly dairy farmers – have done their sums and realise they are heading for below 12 tonnes/ha of dry matter, when they would normally achieve more than 17 tonnes/ha of dry matter. In a number of cases, plant populations have fallen below target. Some growers chose to wait and see whether low density would encourage productivity, but with hindsight, many wish they had re-drilled, or put in a catch crop," he says.

"To make up for the anticipated shortfall on farms where cereals are grown, some of the acreage has been diverted to make wholecrop. I have even heard of producers who have come to an arrangement with a neighbour, to buy in a standing crop of wheat.

"When it comes to maize quality at harvest, we may be entering unknown territory and it appears crops on individual farms are going to vary widely.

"On the whole, I think the early-maturing varieties will be satisfactory; it is the later-maturing crops which will suffer the most. The delayed harvest last year led to an increase in the popularity of early-maturing varieties being sown this time and I am expecting the trend to continue, after such a disappointing season for the second year in a row."

Most newer varieties are better equipped to withstand stress caused by cold and wet conditions.

Early-maturing varieties could be a safer bet, if volatile weather patterns become the norm, says Mike Corp.

> A minority of crops have had to be ploughed in to make way for additional grass to boost volume in the clamp
>
> MIKE CORP

GRASS SILAGE

GRASS silage volume and quality to date is showing polarised results, says Simon Draper of the Maize Growers' Association.

"Most silages have been either good or bad this season, with fewer than usual in the middle range," he says.

"Growers with grass silages which have fallen below quality expectations are likely to be short of starch in the ration.

"The situation may be compounded by the lower starch levels which have been predicted for the UK maize crop. It is a good idea to introduce wholecrop to the ration, if it is available. It will help to balance forage rations over winter."

DISEASE

NIGEL Chesters, of BCW Agriculture, Market Drayton, Shropshire, says one of his main concerns is the risk of eyespot and fusarium damage to the growing crop.

"The level of fusarium and eyespot in cereal crops has been the worst I have seen for more than 20 years. It seems inevitable some maize crops will suffer a similar fate," he says.

"Badly infected maize fields may need to be harvested early, as they could turn out to be high in dry matter, and therefore difficult to ensile. I would recommend the use of an additive, preferably one which has been specifically developed to combat moulds and yeasts, which can lead to spoilage in the clamp."