



VELCOURT

Black-grass

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An easier year for black-grass control will still provide plenty of pointers for growers at Cereals, believes farm management company Velcourt.

Visitors to the Velcourt site at this year's Cereals Event will be surprised to see black-grass growing freely in the winter wheat plots, admits the company's technical director Keith Norman.

"It's a departure from our normal display," he says. "And in common with most farmers this season, it isn't because we've had control failures or difficulties with spray programme timings."

The reason is that Velcourt is looking at the contribution made by the pre-emergence and post-emergence sprays separately, comparing the efficacy of different products and combinations of herbicides on black-grass control in a single spray situation. (See table)

"A one-hit approach is not practiced on Velcourt managed farms," stresses Mr Norman. "Not only would it be very risky from a herbicide resistance point of view, weed control and wheat yields would be compromised too."

"But this year's demonstration will highlight strengths and weaknesses of the main components of herbicide programmes, and show where improvements can be made. No doubt it will also show why a programme is necessary."

Early observations show that all the pre-emergence treatments on trial have had an effect on black-grass numbers, but none have done a complete clean-up. The post-emergence sprays have also varied in their performance, with some being better than others.

"There haven't been any big surprises to date," notes Mr Norman. "But it's too early to draw any firm or final conclusions. That information will be available at Cereals."

Not surprisingly, Atlantis features in four of the nine post-emergence treatments, both on its own and with partner products. "The resistance threat is very real. We are using Atlantis quite widely on our farms, but always in combination with other herbicides and in planned programmes."

The case for autumn applications of Atlantis is strong, he believes. "Its activity is slowed by cold temperatures and it works best if applied when the black-grass is small. Late drilling situations make timing trickier, but we do have Pacifica as a spring option now."

Different pre-emergence partners are also used by Velcourt, depending on the likely weed spectrum and soil conditions. Flufenacet-based products are used extensively at this timing in bad black-grass situations, with cultural control techniques employed wherever possible too.

Panel - Farm Experience

Andrew Hunt, who manages 1200ha at Rougham Estate near Bury St Edmunds for Velcourt, describes this as an easier year for black-grass control.

"We had to use a three spray approach last year, bringing in a Hawk/IPU holding spray in the autumn, before our main post-emergence spray with Atlantis" he recalls. "That added an extra £18/ha to our herbicide costs."

This season, he has managed to treat black-grass areas with a two spray programme, applying a pre-emergence treatment of Liberator+DFF, followed by Atlantis/trifluralin in early December.

"The conditions were right this year. The hot dry summer meant that the black-grass had a short dormancy and the weather conditions in the autumn allowed us to get on with the post-emergence spray when the weeds were still small. So far, the results are very good."

Black-grass only affects one third of the farm, on the heavier land, adds Mr Hunt. "On the remainder, we have wild oats which require a spring follow-up treatment."

Brome is patch treated where necessary, using either Attribut or Monitor. "There's no doubt that sterile brome has made inroads since we established buffer strips. I've been surprised by how quickly it has managed to invade – it's very aggressive."

For the time being, sterile brome can be kept in check with this approach, he notes. "If it gets worse and we need to use a brome-specific spray in the spring, we will have to plan out herbicide programmes very carefully as we are only allowed one ALS inhibitor per crop."

His colleague, Tim Harper, who manages four farms totalling 1770ha in South Lincolnshire for Velcourt, has a different set of challenges to overcome.

Although only 25% of the land he farms has black-grass, the inclusion of spring crops in the rotation appears to have had an effect on its germination timing and spread.

"On the land in the Holbeach area, we get isolated patches of black-grass," he explains. "As we grow vining peas and sugar beet, I'm sure the weed seed is spread around on contractors vehicles and harvesting equipment."

That makes it difficult to predict where the weed is likely to appear next, he remarks. "It's a case of finding it before we can treat it. That's why Pacifica could be a useful product for us, allowing a spring hit without compromising control."

Mr Harper believes that spring cropping has influenced black-grass germination timing. "It seems to be later germinating where we have spring root cropping, which can make spray timing more difficult."

This year, he opted for Liberator+trifluralin at the pre-emergence timing, followed by Atlantis applied at the end of November, and is anticipating good results.

"We are also in a position to use a double break situation to prevent black-grass becoming an expensive problem," continues Mr Harper. "Following vining peas with potatoes allows us to exploit this useful control method, which was highlighted by a LINK project."

By not cultivating the land at all, the black-grass seeds remain on the soil surface, where their survival reduces rapidly or they are predated. "The trick is to refrain from doing any cultivations. It's a very good, but often impractical, technique."

Where annual meadow-grass makes an appearance, a cost-effective IPU/DFF spray is used. "We're also seeing sterile brome coming in from our grass margins, but we're managing to contain it with treatment round the edge of the field."

Panel

Velcourt's new slogan for 2007 'it's good to be farming' reflects the industry's changing fortunes and new mood of optimism, believes Mr Norman.

"Prices are better, new markets are opening up and our reliance on the SFP is less," he explains. "The enjoyment is back."

That means the company is concentrating on maximising tonnes produced per hectare. "We're farming for yield and profit. But we're also doing it within the requirements of our customers and consumers, which will be clear from other areas of our Cereals demonstration."

Table – Herbicide Treatments on Test at Cereals

Pre-emergence

Stomp (pendimethalin)
 Zimbali (pendimethalin+trifluralin)
 Defy+Stomp (pendimethalin+prosulfocarb)
 Bullion+Stomp (pendimethalin+flupyrsulfuron)
 Crystal (flufenacet+pendimethalin)
 Liberator (flufenacet+DFF)
 Avadex (tri-allate)*

Post Emergence

Atlantis(mesosulfuron+iodosulfuron)
 Atlantis+Stomp
 Atlantis+DFF
 Atlantis+Liberator+DFF
 Pacifica
 Axial
 Topik*

**permitted for use on conservation headlands*