

28 October 2021

General comments

World Earthworm Day was Thursday 21st October – lots of good-humoured Tweeting and other social media on the benefits of the little critters. But we're all far more aware of the benefits of soil health and as indicators go, earthworms are one of the best. Even simple things like optimising pH have huge impacts on their numbers and the benefits they bring. We have recently moved soils from our long-term pH experiment at our Craibstone campus to form a new experimental site over the road at Ashton Farm – we are branding this our ACE platform and watch this space for more on that. But to get back to earthworms – the seagulls had a field day when we trucked out the soils from Craibstone but they didn't go near the ones from the pH 5 and below plots. Hardly any earthworms – same crops, same soil and just a different pH. It was incredible.

There is much happening in the run up to the COP26 summit and likely some announcements on where future Scottish policy will head on the net zero angle for agriculture. But it seems pretty evident that soil health baselining and integrated pest management will feature more strongly.

Regional comments

Caithness

Yet more heavy rainfall in the period as fields become more saturated. Cattle are starting to be housed. Obvious concern for cereal growers is the eye watering increasing in fertiliser prices. All of the potato harvest in the area has been completed and to growers liking.

Aberdeenshire

Aberdeenshire has continued to experience wet weather over the past couple of weeks, due to this slug pressures in winter crops should be closely monitored.

Banff & Buchan

The weather continues to be a mixed bag – a spell of heavy rain followed by a dry spell which sees a flurry of activity, from sprayers getting the last of the autumn applications on, some ploughing for spring crops, to some growers still trying to get in some more wheat. For those with some patience, the reward is that even the later sown crops are going into surprisingly good seedbeds, although the usual wet patches in fields are beginning to show themselves again. Crops are still growing – oilseed rape crops are looking “proud” – hopefully not too proud. Pre-emergence weed control has been patchy at best and follow up treatments will be required to tidy up some crops. Fungicides are in the process of being applied with insecticides also being included to try and keep the threat of cabbage stem flea beetle larvae in check. Winter barleys are also looking well with winter wheats slowly catching up. The price of fertiliser remains a hot topic as those farmers still to buy consider whether to bite the bullet or play “wait and see” in case the price comes down. Those lucky enough to have bought early will be very relieved to have things booked up. Prices of grain remain high and this also applies to 2022 and 2023 crops, so at least growers have the opportunity to lock into these to offset some of the increased input prices. Elsewhere potatoes are all but finished – not surprisingly yields are back but at least quality seems to be good. Cattle continue to be cleared from the fields and taken inside.

Kincardineshire

A relatively dry spell of weather over the last fortnight has seen the last of the potato crops lifted in the area and yields seem to be good. Early sown Winter oilseed rape crops are looking tremendous and well on. Winter cereals got a good start but the drop in temperature and more recent rain has checked them a little and they seem to have slowed down. Many farmers are looking towards spring now for planning crops but there is great uncertainty as to if it is worth growing spring barley next year due to the massive price hike in fertiliser.

Angus

The weekend saw the end to the potato harvest for most, ahead of the rain this week. Most wheat is sown, however, a few fields after late ware potato crops are still to be established. On the whole crops look good, with some very forward oilseed rape. Some disease has been found in winter barley crops, mainly mildew, however hopefully the frost will clean this up.

Perthshire

Potato harvesting and wheat drilling are now down to the last few fields. Winter sown crops on the whole, are more advanced than what might be classed as usual for the time of year. These proud crops and mild weather mean that disease can be quite easily found in winter barley and oilseed rape crops and this will need to be monitored. Light leaf spot sprays are now being applied to winter oilseed rape along with insecticide for rape winter stem weevils in susceptible areas and any graminicides to tidy up volunteer cereals. Autumn

herbicides have been applied to the vast majority of earlier sown cereals but recent wet and / or windy weather has made it difficult to get onto later sown fields.

Fife

Crops sown this backend are looking well. Early sown WOSR has a massive canopy which looks fairly free from disease. Later sown WOSR is at 4 or 5 leaf but is growing away fine. Winter barley is starting to tiller but has quite high levels of mildew in some places, let's hope frosty weather arrives soon. Winter wheats range from early tillering with low levels of Septoria to just sown but yet to emerge. Some potato fields that were lifted in wetter conditions will not be going into wheat due to soil conditions and the price of fertiliser. Colder, more wintery weather would suit now, it will help canopy management and help control the spread of mildew.

Lothians

Chrichton has recorded 73mm to date this month, Haddington very similar at 72mm. Having been somewhat affected by capping on wet soils last spring, it's not surprising that some growers have left wheats drilled on heavier ground unrolled this autumn, least the same happens again. There is plenty of moisture right through the soil horizon and even germination is therefore the norm in what continues to be growthy conditions. Slug grazing of cereals doesn't appear to be an issue either above or below ground. Many took the opportunity to get rape and wheat in early and there are certainly forward crops about of both. Frustrating however, that spraying days have been curtailed by wind and rain and the inability to travel on some fields meaning there are still crops to clean up and some growers have already taken the decision to defer herbicides until spring.

Borders

The return of unsettled weather is delaying final wheat sowing after potato lifting and progress with autumn sprays. Hopefully some settled conditions will allow a catch up on weed control and light leaf spot protection on rape before sprayers are drained down for the winter. Early sown cereals are tillering and generally establishment is even across the field. Slug activity is most notable following oilseed rape, but lower than previous years. Early sown oilseed rape is well developed and flowering charlock heads can be seen in some fields, with late sown crops at 4 leaf. Light leaf spot and traces of mildew, net blotch and septoria can be found in relevant crops, but disease levels are generally low.

Stirling

The weather has now turned wet and most winter crops are looking well with little disease about. Some of the late sown winter wheats are just coming through. Winter barleys are now tillering well and there are some traces of rhynchosporium about. Winter wheats are yet to tiller but are clean of disease. The winter oilseed rape crops are now very well established and growing well.

Ayrshire

It has been a wetter couple of weeks in Ayrshire which is starting to impact ground conditions and we are seeing more and more cattle being brought into sheds in the region. Temperatures have been up and down with some very cool mornings starting to creep in as we get near to the clock change. Winter crops sown earlier on are up and through and generally looking well, however, where there are wetter areas in fields some crops are a little patchy.