Disease pressure eases but worries over lodging

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Crops looking good - but not so with prices

THE GLEANER

TEMPERATURES have continued to rise and all things arable across most of Scotland appear to be looking 'good to excellent' in the parlance of the US Department of Agriculture in the Borders.

Back in USDA's home territory, heavy rainfall in the US Plains and the prospect of more rain has seen concerns over their wheat crop diminish and prices have been falling as a result. Last week, feed wheat futures fell most days as the news sunk in to the market that a weather crisis had been averted.

However, there yet remains some concerns regarding weather around the globe. This year, there is preceived to be an increased risk that an El Nino weather phenomenon may occur according to forecasters.

The US climate prediction centre reports a greater possibility of El Nino occurring by summer, 2015. This, typically, brings drier weather to South East Asia, which is the main palm producing area and Australia, and can cause severe drought – which is already happening in huge areas Down Under.

Impacts vary depending on the time of year El Nino develops and its strength. If it does develop, it could impact palm oil and Australian crop production, which could potentially add some support to both grain and oilseed prices.

However, the occurrence of an El Nino in 2015 is far from certain. Twelve months ago a similar level of probability was reported, but it never fully developed. Nevertheless, it remains 'a watch for' factor for the months ahead.

That recent drought – now largely quenched – in the US Plains caused the proportion of crops rated 'good to excellent' to fall from 44% on April 5 to 42% by April 12, although this is still above last year's 34%. But, the recent wet weather in the US has not been welcomed in some of their maize growing regions as it has put planting behind schedule.

Wheat prices are also not being helped by Ukraine's winter crop continuing to look good and this global improvement in crop potential has seen 6% taken off the Chicago wheat futures.

The markets are still waiting for confirmation regarding the removal of the €35 per tonne Russian export tax. This is not expected for another month, so uncertainty over Russia's ability to export will continue.

Going forward, prices will vary depending on how the growing crop develops and whilst crops generally look good at present, there are still several months of crop development until harvest, which could change the pattern of prices. Only time will tell.

MV SELAMET being filled with barley recently at Aberdeen Harbour

UK feed barley prices remain low and demand is similar. Despite this – or maybe because of it – the largest single barley export has left Aberdeen for Libya, with barley from farms across the North-east of Scotland after Openfield agreed a sale for 16,500 tonnes to the north African state.

More than 500 deliveries were tipped direct to vessel over a six-day period, with extra cranes brought in to manage the loading and ensure the vessel departed on time. The passage is expected to take 12 days.

With Europe awash with grain from the 2014 harvest, having the facilities to handle larger vessels is the only way to move the surplus, Openfield argued.

Spring barley drilling is now more or less complete throughout the UK and has gone into good seed beds so the potential is good provided there is some rain to chit the seed. But, there is little or no trade taking place at present in old crop malting barley, as maltsters appear to have plenty of stocks to last until this harvest.

There has been some demand for soyabean for crushing recently, which saw May, 2015, US soyabean futures increase – also helped along by a weakening US dollar and resulted in US futures going up by nearly $5.

This level of crushing is the fourth highest on record and US soyabean crushing reached 4.43m tonnes in March. The average soyabean crush margin for this season from July to March is 18% higher year on year, driven by a lower average soyabean seed price and higher average meal price compared with 2013/14.

But as a result of higher prices, farmers sold some stocks, which again saw prices fall back and the recent rain in the US helped seed beds ahead of the drilling of new crop soya.

Argentina's soyabean harvest is now 32% complete, compared to 21% at this time last year and with 80% of their crop still left to sell, this could soon add pressure to prices.

Old crop beans are struggling to find buyers as there is a lack of human consumption interest at present. As a result, quality human consumption stocks are now being downgraded to feed and, again with little interest in feed beans either, these extra stocks will only add price pressure to the feed bean market.

New crop beans, like most other winter and spring sown cereal crops have generally established well and progressing in the favourable growing conditions.

False sense of security over disease prevention

WHILE CROP disease has been checked by the weather, don't be lulled into a false sense of security, is the warning to growers in Scotland and the North of England, from Chris Martin, of Agrovista.

In wheat, his biggest concern is plant architecture with the worry that prostrate plants could easily succumb to septoria with the right weather conditions. "The weather has helped check disease but despite this a repeat of 2014 is possible. Although not at 2014 levels for the corresponding time of year, there is still plenty of inoculum at the bottom of plants," he argued.

"The proximity of new growth to this is a real concern and we only need a shower or two to set it off. With weather not impeding T0 sprays, it does give him a measure of comfort but he wants growers to adhere to robust T1s too.

"Last season, growers were tempted into early T0s to deal with lush and septoria threatened crops. That resulted in T1 applications being compromised too. We've avoided that this year but we must adhere to robust rates of azoles at the T1," he cautioned.

T0s – or lack of – are his concern with winter barley. With many growers unable to get on he says there's no second chance with T1 sprays.

"Once again the rhynchosporium pressure is high and robust varieties such as Volume and Cassata are showing signs of the disease. Growers could need to upgrade to an SDHI such as SiltraXpro (prothioconazole + bixafen) at the T1 timing to counter the threat. Regardless of approach taken it is imperative that prothioconazole is the base," he said.

The other disease on Mr Martin's radar is mildew and, with barley T0s being compromised, a robust response is likely. That mildew threat is highlighted by what he is seeing in oat crops – whilst field-walking, every step has produced 'mildew clouds' which he says are a shot across the bows.

"The growth characteristics of oats are a good barometer for what we might face in barley or wheat, especially where no GS30 treatment has been made. We are fortunate that our core barley azole (prothioconazole) is active but we might need to bolster with specific mildewicide, such as Talius (proquinazid)," he added.

He points out that growers have moved to more resilient septoria wheat varieties but some of these are a susceptible to mildew. "Many growers have probably used the T0 as an opportunity to damp down the mildew threat. Of course, prothioconazole based T1s will aid suppression further but even then a second Talius application might be necessary," he concluded.

15-tonnes but with a light tread!

SEEN WORKING at North Arkleston Farm, near Paisley, was Jimmy Ritchie driving this 1988/'89 agricultural Caterpillar D5 tracked crawler and Kverneland six-furrow plough. The crawler has come in handy in recent months catching up with ploughing on wet land and Mr Ritchie hopes to add a further three-furrow reversible to the plough body to make a 10-furrow machine for autumn work

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