



Promoting Seed Innovation



**BRITISH SOCIETY OF
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A CHALLENGING YEAR

It would be hard to start this edition of Promoting Seed Innovation without mentioning the weather over the past year, it's been so difficult for growers and breeders alike. Whilst we can't control the weather, the BSPB has been working alongside other groups to try to make sure the policy environment doesn't make your job harder.

In future editions we'll be saying more about how we are expanding that policy work to try and ensure UK growers have access to the latest and best varieties, and that innovation in plant breeding is encouraged and supported.

It can be hard to think about the longer-term when the challenges of the weather and climate are here and now, but one thing is clear, and that's how plant breeding has always been a central part of helping farmers manage the cropping issues they face. The difficulty is that we all know plant breeding is a long-term, risky, international, and expensive undertaking.

At the moment, the additional bureaucracy, barriers to exporting and importing seed, and threats to protection products are all stifling progress, but the BSPB is determined to work on improving the outlook for farmers and breeders, as we will examine in this issue.



Anthony Hopkins
Head of Policy

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UPCOMING EVENTS

BSPB will be at Cereals on 11th and 12th June, stand number 505-02, and the team will also have a stand at Groundswell on 26th and 27th June.

At Cereals we will also be hosting a "seed to shelf" panel discussion with:

- Kathryn Hamlen, Syngenta Seeds Marketing Manager
- Dr Kim Hammond-Kosack, Rothamsted Research
- Independent wheat breeder Bill Angus
- KWS spring barley breeder Henry Barber

Farmers Weekly will be moderating, and we are hoping for an MP to open the discussion.

SEED TREATMENTS

One issue we've covered before, and on which there has been some good news, is seed treatments.

At the time of the last edition, we'd heard that Defra was going to allow an extension for British farmers to retain access to a range of seed treatments approved across Europe, and primarily for the maize sector because all maize seed is produced in the EU in countries where they have a better climate to do so.

However, seed treatments are a much wider issue. The BSPB has been at the heart of the work on retaining access to products growers across the EU will still be using.

Now our attention is on securing long-term access to seed treatments, to reduce the risk of another cliff-edge crisis when the extension ends in 2027.

Seed treatments appear to have fallen out of favour with regulators but are crucial for some crops which are difficult to establish, especially in years like this. Seed treatments support growers, supply chains and food security with more reliable and consistent cropping. Investment in research, breeding, and IPM can help reduce our future reliance on protection products and the BSPB is working to help policymakers understand the complex links here.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THE SFI

Now in full flow, the government's Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme has raised many questions, especially following changes that food productivity concerns have limited some incentives to 25% of land use.

We chose to ask a couple of industry experts about what it means to seed and what options are available to farms.

Rod Bonshor, General Manager at Oliver Seeds, a division of DLF Seeds, suggests that whilst it is easy for some farms to achieve a level of SFI by planting a basic mix of grazable rye and vetch, there are more lucrative options that have the benefit of further improving soil health.

"For livestock farmers, clover and herbal ley mixtures are an option that provide better long-term soil health benefits. Putting in herbal ley mixtures can also yield payments of up to £382 per hectare,"

However, he suggests that even higher payments are on offer for arable farms willing to adjust break crops.

"A legume fallow mix is currently a £593 per hectare with SFI. It is low maintenance because it requires no cutting or grazing and can, if a mix with competitive grasses is chosen, also help to fight black grass. At approximately £5.50 per kilo it works out to £165 per hectare, yet if left down for three years will return £1779 per hectare in SFI payments," he says.

George Wallis, Managing Director at Boston Seeds, explains that unlike the previous stewardship criteria, SFI is focused on outputs and delivering scheme aims, rather than inputs.

"Whilst some scheme requirements might seem unclear at first, it's important not to use inappropriate seed mixes that might loosely appear to fulfil the aims. The voluntary guidance is generally quite clear and, where this is the case, these are the basis of our products," he says.

For arable farms he suggests that SFI is a long-term investment that, with proper consideration, can be well integrated into a rotation.



■ George Wallis



■ Rod Bonshor

"It would be easy to make a knee jerk decision in the context of the current weather and challenging recent drilling seasons. Although the area can be flexed down by up to 50% in the second and third years, this could still be a significant area if the initial commitment is too high."

He suggests that whilst 2023/24 has been a challenging year for planting, committing to guaranteed payments may leave some farms wishing the land could be planted with high value crops should the weather and markets improve in the next three years.

Importantly, both Rod and George are in agreement...Rather than take a quick and cost-effective entry into SFI, every farm can benefit from exploring the seeding options available to them, and by investing in a mix that will be beneficial for both farm income and sustainability.