

Booming wheat market leads organic arable expansion

Whilst imported cereals still dominate the UK's organic grain market, a real push to boost domestic production was top of the agenda at a recent meeting in Milton Keynes, where over 70 farmers and industry representatives gathered to discuss organic arable alliances.

Hosted by the Organic Arable Marketing Group (OAMG), the event drew producers from across the UK eager to boost further production of organic wheat (up by 2700ha last year) as well as barley, triticale, oats and rye.

OAMG chairman Gerry Minister, himself an organic arable producer from Kent, reported continuing strong interest in arable conversion with growth in consumer demand from millers as well as the dairy and poultry feed sectors. Two challenges to the sector are looming though – from January 2011 an EU requirement for 50 per cent of total diet feed for non-herbivores to come from own or linked holdings becomes law and from the end of next year feed compounders will have to adopt totally separate lines of production for conventional and organic feeds. “Such regulations breed uncertainty in the sector, especially when the UK's detailed adoption of them is also uncertain,” he said.

Meanwhile the expansion of UK organic wheat growing in particular is posing some agronomic and rotation problems. More and more wheat in the rotation can lead to poor weed suppression and an increased soil nutrient requirement.

“We need to make sure other organic crops are just as economically viable as wheat. New markets for barley and triticale with encouragement for greater use by end users would help limit wheat's place in the organic arable rotation,” said Mr Minister.

Growing demand for organic protein crops such as beans, peas and lupins was highlighted, again as a means of diversifying rotation and income.

Organic miller Michael Marriage of Dove's Farm Foods was keen to work with OAMG to source good samples of UK grown organic rye. At present 75 per cent of his rye is imported, though he appreciates that if the milling rye standard is missed, growers have few alternative uses for the crop. He bemoaned the small premiums available to millers for organic flour and calculated that organic wheat flour incurred 45 per cent extra production costs to achieve only a 10 per cent premium.

One innovation being pursued to correct this was the possible development of varietal flours produced from a single wheat variety. Michael Marriage has his eye on the USA and Canada, where the variety Red Fife is being marketed in varietal products to great success. Already Dove's Farm has dabbled with a regional product – Wessex Flour - with some success.

Feedback from farmers at the OAMG event showed continued optimism about the sector. Their big plea was for greater communication and data transfer amongst all in the organic arable chain to identify production shortfalls and gluts and to promote innovation.

Notes: OAMG was set up by Elm Farm Research Centre. Grainfarmers plc, an OAMG shareholder, is its Marketing Agent. OAMG now markets over 25 per cent of the UK's combinable crops. OAMG does not trade in imports.

