

ARABLE PEST CONTROL

Moving from a run-of-the-mill quad-mounted spinner to a specialist pellet applicator on a set of heavy rolls has revolutionised slug control for one Suffolk grower.

On a roll towards more precise slug pellet application

After doubling acreage in the last year, Suffolk-based Hitchcock Farms has had to reorganise much of its operation fairly rapidly, with seedbed consolidation, grass-weed management and slug control in particular coming under the spotlight. Previously, seedbeds were con-

solidated with an ageing set of eight-metre ring rolls and slug pellets spun on with a disc spreader mounted on the back of the farm's quad bike.

But with metaldehyde under increasing scrutiny and the very real risk of restrictions being applied to its use, the Hitchcocks were keen to look at more precise, targeted means of

applying this critical slug control product as well as Avadex (triallate) granular herbicide.

Output

Will Hitchcock says: "Going from growing about 800 acres of arable crops to more than 1,700 acres in just a year, we knew certain parts of our operation would need a fairly major increase in output to ensure timeliness.

"One critical part that is easily overlooked is the rolls but they are actually much more important than they are often given credit for. Not only do they ensure even crop establishment, in producing a tight seedbed, they make it more difficult for slugs to thrive and help to ensure the efficacy of Avadex."

As part of an integrated approach to controlling slugs, the Hitchcocks were keen to improve the precision with which slug pellets were applied. While the farm's spinning

disc applicator did the job reasonably well, there was no guarantee of granules being evenly spread and there was always the danger that some product could end up close to field boundaries.

"One of the farms that I had worked on had a pellet applicator mounted on the rolls which made perfect sense to me – you were doing two jobs in one pass," says Mr Hitchcock.

"Knowing that we had to upgrade our rolls, we were convinced a two-in-one approach was the way to go. We wanted the heaviest possible 12m set available."

At more than £30,000 the HE-VA King Roller and Opico MicroPro applicator the Hitchcocks settled on was not a cheap package but they are expecting it to do a good 15 years' work.

Suffolk farmer Will Hitchcock has opted for a pellet applicator mounted on rolls for more targeted slug pellet application.



Hitchcock Farms, Ringshall, Stowmarket, Suffolk

- **Farmed area:** 716 hectares
- **Cropping:** 312ha of winter wheat, 148ha sugar beet, 150ha oilseed rape, 20ha spring barley, 20ha winter beans and 66ha winter barley
- **Soils:** Predominantly heavy clays
- **Contracting work:** 546ha beet drilling and 1,133ha beet harvesting
- **Tractors:** John Deere 8335RT, 6210R, 6155R and two 6430s
- **Loading shovel:** Volvo L50,
- **Beet harvester:** Holmer T430
- **Sprayer:** 5,000-litre Knight trailed with 36m booms
- **Rolls:** 12m Opico HE-VA King Roller with MicroPro pellet applicator
- **Staff:** Guy, Liz, Katherine and Will Hitchcock, plus one other full-time

Over the weighbridge it tips the scales at 10.2 tonnes and that hefty weight means the roller can be employed as a cheap secondary cultivator, used by the Hitchcocks on lighter land behind a disc/tine cultivator to produce a seedbed ahead of the farm's power-harrow drill.

Primary role

But it is in their primary role in post-drilling consolidation that the 12m rolls show their worth, the breaker rings smashing clods and packing the surface down tight to produce a slug-hostile environment. But it is not all about sheer bulk.

The rolls' hydraulic system distributes their weight evenly across the working width, while the Special Active Transfer (SAT) set-up is said to ensure each of the implement's five gangs adapt to contours and follow the ground as faithfully as possible.

"You can see the system working as you travel across the field so you know it is doing a decent job, getting the surface down as tight as possible to ensure decent seed-to-soil contact and making life as unpleasant as possible for the slugs," says Mr Hitchcock.

"Being built specifically for the job, the pellet applicator does not feel like an add-on unlike the other units we looked at. The key difference with the MicroPro is that pellets are properly metered out and blown directly to each fan outlet so you

know the right number are going directly where they are meant to rather than relying on a random delivery from a mushroom distribution head."

Being particularly concerned about environmental issues, the precision with which pellets are applied is a major issue for the Hitchcocks. To that end, this year they plan to trial using ferric phosphate on headlands bordering ditches and watercourses, only applying metaldehyde to the centre of fields in an effort to reduce the risk of potential ground water pollution. In addition, being used to apply Avadex the rig will crucially aid in ensuring its efficacy with an even surface finish and uniform coverage of granules.

One of the key factors in choosing an applicator was the need for uniform numbers of granules per square metre.

"With that we know we have a set number of bait points per hectare – critical because slugs do not tend to travel very far from home," says Mr Hitchcock.

"But that evenness of spread is even more important with Avadex – we are fortunate we do not have a huge black-grass burden but we plan to use it selectively where it is beginning to creep in. The rollers will be perfect for that job – switching between products is really easy and because the control box stores everything there is no need to recalibrate every time."

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² Limagrain Survey, 2017.
³ AHDB, United Oilseeds and AHDB Joint Seminar, 2018.
⁴ AHDB Aphid Monitoring: cereals.ahdb.org.uk/aphidmonitoring.

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RAT WATCH from PelGar International



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Watch out – rats are about

The weather has been a daily topic in British small talk over the past few months, but most people do not appreciate the recent dry spell has seen much greater rat activity than normal as they come in search of water, which they must find daily to survive.

Rodent numbers do not necessarily peak during the autumn and winter months, in fact quite the opposite, but they are a more common and frequent problem during this time. In the summer, while there is food in the fields and fruit on the hedgerows most rodent species are happy to stay well away from farms and people.

This year we have also seen a particularly early harvest bringing lower yields in many places. When the last of the grains in the fields are consumed and all the fruit is gone, rodents will migrate from their current habitations in search of a sustainable food source.

This is likely to lead to an early and prolonged rodent season and it will not be long before the first signs of infestation will be seen on your farm. Now is the time to shore up your defences and prepare for the inevitable invasion. If you have had rodent infestations in previous years it is more than likely that this year you will see one too.

Before the first signs of rodents are seen get ahead of the game. Tidy up any old feed sacks and broken machinery, block off any old burrows and fix the bottom of gnawed wooden doors with a metal strip. Cut back any overgrown areas near to your livestock sheds and feed stores. Where possible store feed in metal bins or, at the very least, away from walls and off the ground. A few small steps taken now will not keep rodents out completely, but they will make any rodent control programme that little bit easier to handle.

Be rat aware

PelGar can offer more information and baiting tips. Tel: 01420 80744. Email: info@pelgar.co.uk or visit YouTube and search for 'PelGar'.

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Use rodenticides safely. Always read the label and product information before use.