

A third crop that works?

With an increasing number of anaerobic digesters (AD) being installed and granted planning permission there will potentially be many benefits and opportunities for neighbouring farmers to take advantage of. The vast majority of new AD plants are designed to run wholly on forage crops such as maize, rye and fodder beet but the key question is “Do they all have enough acres to sustainably feed the hungry beasts from their own farm alone?”

For example a 1 mega watt plant run solely on maize would require in the region of 25,000 tonnes of maize silage per year. This equates to 667 hectares yielding an average of 37.5 t/ha. To integrate this into a sustainable rotation may require 2000 hectares. Those that do not have the luxury of that acreage and wish to keep all of their basic payment under the new three crop rule may look to their neighbours to grow some feed stock.

What is in it for the neighbouring grower? With new season feed wheat prices languishing at £125/t ex farm price, a fixed price maize contract with your neighbouring energy producer could be an opportunity not to turn down. Many operators offer a variety of contracts with the benefit of flexible harvest dates and payment terms to suit both sides. Of course it is a case of horses for courses; not every farm is suited to growing 40 tonne per hectare maize crops that can be easily har-

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vested from the field in mid-October without a significant quantity of your soil ending up on the road or the nearest river with the local authority chasing your tail! Whole crop rye is also attractive and provides an excellent accompaniment to the digesters

daily ration.

On my recent tours around the farmland of Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Sussex it has been noticeable that the usual suspects of black grass, barren brome and wild oats which rarely get a look in on the best managed farms seem to be enjoying the summer sun rather too much. For those of us plagued by this unholy triumvirate an energy crop foraged at the right time may prove to be a cost effective way of controlling weed seed dispersal.

Location is always important as not everyone wishing to grow an energy crop for a newly commissioned AD plant will be farming next door. Effective use of haulage contractors and efficient loading can keep haulage costs to £4.5/t delivered to the clamp from a distance of up to 30 miles.

For those who are considering upgrading their various



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farming equipment to cope with those extra hundred acres or so recently taken on; crop diversification may allow you to prolong the life of an old cultivator or combine. Although not to the amusement of your tractor driver who has just returned from the annual work outing to Cereals with a big shopping list!

The varied drilling dates for hybrid Rye provide flexibility to fit around autumn drilling which ensures the first and second wheat crops get the lion's share of the cultivation and drilling time. Maize brings the option of spring drilling; therefore relieving pressure on autumn drilling and the opportunity to break the green bridge to get on top of your grass weeds for the following cereal crop.

For those that may be still “umming and ahrring” on this year's rotation or what to do with that extra 100 acres it may be worth investigating AD crop contracts that may be further afield.

Crop	Whole Crop Rye	Maize Silage	Spring Barley	Wheat
	£/ha	£/ha	£/ha	£/ha
Output				
Yield	35	37.5	7	9
Price	30	32	120	130
Total	1,050	1,200	840	1,170
Variable costs				
Seed	160	189	70	80
Fertiliser	135	185	150	200
Sprays	60	120	130	170
Total	355	494	350	450
Gross margin	695	706	500	720



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