

Colin Walsh and Eoin Lyons  
examine a crop stand on  
Colin's farm in Co Wicklow.



# The tillage sting in the tail after a difficult autumn

Many winter cereal crops were drilled early and have suffered varying levels of damage. Others were planted late, reducing yield potential; some crops were not planted at all. Growers must try to salvage these crops while keeping an eye on costs

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**A**t the time of writing we are updating the 2024 Teagasc Costs and Returns booklet so the figures mentioned may differ slightly to those published later in January. Nonetheless they provide a good indication of likely costs that

2024 crops will need to cover. **See Table 1**

The total input figures exclude machinery costs (€600-700/ha) and the breakeven figure also excludes land rental which can add substantial cost to many tillage farms.

In a normal year these breakeven yields would look easily achievable for most crops. This year, depending on the field location and the damage inflicted by the above average rainfall, they may be a challenge for some.

Crops should be assessed in the coming weeks to see what actions need to be taken to give the best financial result.

There are a number of scenarios facing growers:

- Leave crops alone and hope for the best
- Re-sow areas in the spring (if seed is available)
- Continue to drill winter cereals in the spring
- Don't sow any more winter varieties

and concentrate on spring varieties

Leaving crops alone and putting up with the bare patches may seem like an obvious decision but it depends on the plant population throughout the field and the size of the bare areas.

**See Table 2.**

The decision whether to replant is reasonably straightforward in normal years. However, the 'altered agronomy' can often be difficult to manage as these crops don't have full yield potential. Reducing inputs is necessary.

Generally, the first area where savings can be made is in nitrogen application. Total nitrogen application will need to be altered based on the potential yield of the crop and its BER, i.e. the economic return on the nitrogen in terms of crop yield.

Some farmers will have reduced nitrogen application last year due to the cost of nitrogen relative to the price of the grain. This year, although the cost of fertiliser has fallen, the

yield response of some of the lower plant counts will not be as great as for normal crops. The return on nitrogen will be lower.

The second area where some savings could be made on thinner crops is in terms of disease control.

Thin crops, depending on the varietal susceptibility, tend to be under less pressure from fungal diseases. Reduced rates, fewer applications or cheaper products may all be options to cut costs.

One area where costs may actually increase is weed control. Many herbicides rely on assistance from crop competition. In the thinner crops, light may get down to the base of the crop for longer than normal; this could lead to a prolonged germination period.

### Spring options

The various options in the spring will also have to be considered over the coming weeks. Many growers will continue to drill winter wheat varieties until mid-February depending on soil suitability, access to seed, workload etc. Results from DAFM trials generally show that these crops will deliver yields similar to spring varieties. So again, inputs should be tailored to match yield potential.

Once the decisions have been reached on winter crops, decisions on the spring options can be made. For many, spring barley is the default option.

However heavy fields can perform poorly when drilled with spring barley so wheat, oats and beans should also be considered on these soil types. Conversely, beans perform poorly on light land. Barley will definitely be the better option there.

Schemes – e.g. protein aid, straw incorporation – can also help the profitability of the various crops and should be considered carefully over coming weeks. Target poor or thin crops for the straw incorporation scheme. Plan to bale the thicker crops as this will help the margin on the poorer crops while also helping to ensure that you have straw to sell to your customers.

Colin Walsh is based in Kilbride,



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**Table 1: Estimated cereal growing costs 2024**

	Winter wheat	Winter barley	Winter oats	Spring Barley
Total input costs (fert., seed & spray) (€/ha)	1,022	881	723	693
Breakeven yield (own land) T/ha	8.1	7.8	7.0	6.4

**Table 2: Plant counts in winter cereals crops and actions needed (based on relatively even plant distribution)**

Winter Cereal Plant Count /m <sup>2</sup>				
*Agronomy	Wheat	Barley (2 row)	Barley (6 row)	Oats
Normal	200+	250+	170+	275+
Altered	90 – 200	150 – 250	100 – 150	150 - 275
Replant	< 90	< 150	< 90	< 90

Co. Wicklow. His farm is made up of various soil types with the majority being most suitable for winter crops. Typically, 75% of Colin's cropping is winter wheat, winter oilseed rape and winter barley, with the remainder being drilled with spring crops.

"Autumn and early winter 2023 was very challenging," says Colin. "We only got half of the targeted cereal area drilled. For the crops that were drilled, plant counts are reasonable but there are parts of fields where the crop has failed entirely due to poor seedbeds and waterlogging.

"There are parts of fields where machinery overlapped or where field springs were high at sowing and the crop is poor in these areas.

"Management of these patches will be tricky in the spring however I do not think I will try to re-sow all of these areas. It would be difficult to produce a viable spring crop and they are relatively small in proportion to the whole field.

"It will be even more important this spring to assess the potential of all my winter crops and tailor my agronomy programme to their potential."



Colin Walsh farms in Kilbride, Co Wicklow.