

Anglia Farmer

Making the most of light soils for North Norfolk landowners

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Farming company boosts returns with root, energy and seed crops, reports Judith Tooth.

Light, easy working soils may not produce the highest yields, but, by enhancing income with root, energy and seed crops, they earn a good return. That's the experience of Sentry North Norfolk's farm manager, Doug Pickup, and, with 25 years in the job, he's well-qualified to know what the farms he looks after can best produce.

Sentry North Norfolk, part of a national company with headquarters in Suffolk, was set up in 1991 managing 600ha. The area has grown to 2000ha across seven farms, from Cley next the Sea to Congham near King's Lynn.

Mr Pickup, who studied agriculture at Cirencester and cut his teeth on a Sentry farm in the M25 corridor, has been farm manager from the start, supported by regional business manager John Hall.

Base for Mr Pickup and his team of six tractor drivers is on one of the contract farms, at Syderstone, where machinery for all the farms is stored and maintained, and where they meet each morning.

The core of the business is contract farming, where Sentry supplies management, machinery and labour for the farms, and the landowners the land, buildings and infrastructure such as irrigation.

There is no set blueprint across all the farms: each agreement is bespoke, but all are structured so that part of Sentry's remuneration is based on productivity and profitability, making the performance of each farm of "utmost importance."

"So, for example, we maximise the area of roots grown – sugar beet and potatoes – as they are the most profitable," says Mr Pickup. "We look for added value through growing seed crops, energy crops and premium crops like malting barley. But the added value must outweigh any additional production costs."

Potatoes are grown on four of the farms, three of which have irrigation. All the crops are grown for processing, mainly for chipping, with one farm supplying the crisping market. Parsnips are grown on one farm on a cropping licence, but other vegetable crops would only be considered if the cost of controlling potato cyst nematode made growing potatoes uneconomic.

“Generally our PCN counts are zero, however we are starting to find fields, or areas of fields, where PCN egg counts have increased. This means field selection, rotation and nematocide usage are becoming much more important. In some cases rotations are being pushed out to eight or even 12 years.”

Sugar beet harvesting is contracted out to Russell Agriculture, and lifting of the 2016 crop is now complete. Winter wheat follows the early lifted crops and spring malting barley the later ones. Most wheat is grown to supply the local feed mills, with a small area of milling wheat on one farm and seed wheat on another.

Spring naked oats was introduced into the rotation last year. Grown for the pet food market as a second cereal-cum-semi-break crop following winter malting barley, it performed well. This year the area sown is up from 45ha to 70ha.

Linseed

“We were growing linseed,” says Doug, “and, although yields weren’t that bad, the price dragged the margin down, and there were some management issues: it had to be sown and harvested late in the season, and storing a tiny crop was not very efficient. The oats produce a lot of straw, which could be an issue for the following crop, but we are supplying the straw, along with straw from other crops, to an outdoor pig unit in exchange for muck.”

Forage maize has been grown on the lightest land for a local anaerobic digester plant for the past four years, and forage rye is in its second season. Judged over four years, maize has produced reasonable yields, but the lack of sunshine last June hit the energy crops hardest.

The maize – drilled and harvested by contractors – is grown on some of the lightest land, usually after late-lifted root crops. The whole-crop rye is harvested early by contractors, easing the harvest workload, and can be followed with, for example, oilseed rape. There’s also the opportunity for digestate from the AD plant to be applied on the rye stubble to benefit the following crop.

Conventional and HOLL oilseed rape are grown across the farms, the HOLL type earning a premium. Black oats and berseem clover are grown before sugar beet on one farm as a means of holding nutrients.

Cover crops have not been taken up in a big way: “Controlling potato volunteers is very important to avoid build up of soil-borne pests, so we have to spray cereal stubbles, which makes including cover crops quite difficult. Where they are used it’s also important to select species that is appropriate for the next crop.

“We haven’t been forced down the spring cropping route for control of blackgrass, and our winter/spring ratio of crops is much the same as it’s always been. With a wide rotation, there would be opportunities to control it, but the only time we’ve seen it is when it was brought in on straw used to insulate a parsnip crop.”

Although the farms are spread across a wide area of North Norfolk, their soils vary very little: the light, easy working conditions mean big savings on horsepower, compared with heavy land farms, but high expenditure on wearing metal.

“Cultivation points, de-stoners, harvesting equipment – machinery is expensive to run as the soil is so abrasive. But we can establish crops in two passes, either with a plough and press for root crops, maize and second cereals, or deep, non-inversion cultivation with a Sumo Trio followed by Horsch Pronto drill to establish wheat after a break crop of oilseed rape, sugar beet or potatoes, as there are no straw residues to deal with.

“If you go back, say, 15 years, it would have been three passes, sometimes four, to establish a combinable crop, but the cost of production has forced us to cut that back. And equipment has improved, we mustn’t overlook that.

“Our soil type does lend itself to establishment with fewer passes, and we can still plough reasonably cost-effectively as we don’t have to do another pass between ploughing and drilling.”

Satellite guidance is used for automatic steering and yield mapping, but Doug has not gone down the road of full-blown precision farming: with soils pretty consistent, he doesn’t see huge variation in yields across fields, so it’s hard to justify the investment and make good use of the information generated.

Opportunities to grow Sentry North Norfolk are always welcome: “Expansion is always on our minds, to cut the cost of production and improve efficiency and profitability.”