

**Press release**

**FINAL 27.2.25**

**Agronomy Coop Chief Calls for Cooperative Research for a Sustainable Sector**

We need to cooperate on crop research to create a sustainable agricultural industry, says Adam Christie, Managing Director of independent agronomy coop, Scottish Agronomy.

“As the industry undertakes some major changes to meet the challenges of Net Zero, it is essential that this change is driven by science and not sentiment, and we need a call to arms to get the whole sector working together to gather this science and joined up thinking that allows us to tackle climate change as one. We are not big enough to tackle sustainability on our own, as an organisation or as individual growers; we need to learn from each other, see the mistakes as well as the successes, and most importantly to take science out of the lab and into the field to ensure it works in both.”

Scottish Agronomy was set up in the 1980s by a group of farmers who wanted to run their own crop trials and share the findings to guide their variety choices and crop management on their own farms. The coop now has 250 members and over 25,000 trials plots in three key locations across Scotland as well as on some members’ farms, trialling varieties of wheat, rye, oilseeds, barley and triticale, chemistry and, more recently, cover crops.

“When embarking on potentially major change in how we grow our crops, it’s essential that we have confidence in the results. The challenge with the type of in-field research work that we do is that it takes several seasons across different sites to collate meaningful data and prove the concept. So, although we’ve seen some encouraging results from cover cropping, for example, and it’s tempting to rush to press, it is multi-year, multi-site trials that will give growers the confidence to take steps towards changing the way they grow. This is the evidence and science used to find solutions for farmers to grow profitably, with less chemistry and achieving yields with the right management. The more we can cooperate and collaborate on research, the more we invest in the success of the industry as a whole.”

2024 saw the highest ever number of plots at Scottish Agronomy, testing varieties and chemistry, conventional as well as biological, fertiliser and all other agronomic influences.

But, Mr Christie says,

“Divided we will fail. I was struck on a visit to Denmark to discover that Arla is worth half as much again as the whole of Scottish Agriculture. This growth is because they work as a business with other corporates and organisations to create the latest science and give it the broad and rigorous testing it needs to prove valuable to growers and food production. Even businesses on such a scale realise that the sustainability challenge is too great for them to tackle alone.”

It is incumbent on all agricultural institutions to ensure that areas of research to meet sustainable targets also meet growers needs and do not just ensure income streams for a particular institution, says Mr Christie.

“We have seen how science in a lab can fail when it’s in the ground, only to find it’s not Scotland- or UK-proof. A genius idea to get every crop to produce nitrogen like a pulse, for example, failed in the soil as the conditions in the true environment prevented colonisation in the root. That is only apparent when it’s tested on farm.”

This is why also, it’s so important not to have lab-only registration of products, he adds:

“There are billions being poured into research for biologicals but there’s not enough being done yet to prove their efficacy in real life situations to justify their use and the funding. These are being marketed as the equivalent of pesticides but there are a lot of questions still if they are the right answer. If growers don’t have the right tools, failures and costs are going to escalate, for the whole supply chain and the consumer.”

On-farm trials help de-risk change on farm by first testing the concept. Scottish Agronomy, in the last few years, has undertaken ongoing, multi-year trials looking at some of the alternatives to chemistry, including the effects of cover crops on rotation, enhanced rock weathering products and Biochar. The results, though in some cases looking promising, have not been published as patterns are yet to be seen.

“It’s exciting to see the impacts of these different techniques that, through an integrated approach, will help meet both a growing population’s needs and the grower’s own alongside Net Zero ambitions.

“Given the lack of practical research carried out in these subject areas in Scotland up to now, however, there will be no second chances if we get this wrong.

“Institutions, corporates and organisations such as Scottish Agronomy will have to work together to pool resources and maximise solutions. While it is frustrating that we did not start this work 10 years ago, the fact that it is underway now hopefully ensures that when the change comes, it will also bring opportunity. Denmark figured this out five years ago. It’s time that we followed suit. We would like to work with others who also see the benefit of a collaborative, sustained and sustainable crop and potato sector in Scotland and the UK.”

There is often a public perception that it’s the farmers that are being subsidised, adds Mr Christie, but research funding and basic payments are what supports the R&D that help keep down the costs of production and of the end product.

“End-users now look at growers as part of the solution rather than part of the problem, gives a forward-thinking sector a generational opportunity to reset their relationship with those that purchase their produce.”