

No crops is an SFP 'no go'

When **Andrew Blake** first visited FARMERS WEEKLY's midlands barometer farm in Lincs in January 2004 the prospect of a single farm payment was already well to the fore. Now that the SFP is a reality he returns to see how it is affecting plans

ALTHOUGH SOME growers see the SFP's arrival as a chance to abandon cropping and do the barest minimum with their land, that idea was soon discarded by the Atkinson family, father John and brothers Ben and George.

Indeed on the 2380ha (5875 acres) of mainly fen land they run from Grange Farm, Rippingale, near Bourne they regard CAP reform as the spur to reappraise their business, hopefully to remain profitable.

Echoing Darwinian theory George says: "It's not necessarily the largest or smallest that survive, but the ones who can adapt quickest to change."

For Ben the prospect of not producing crops is a non-starter.

"When we sat down and looked at it we frightened ourselves at how much it would cost us to do nothing. We still have to pay ourselves and bear a whole range of expenses."

"Our drainage rates alone are £7/acre," says John.

Not least among their deliberations was the desire to retain the farm's three full-time staff, he adds.

"We wanted to ensure they have a future with us. They are all in their forties and two of them have been with us since school."

The next logical step, with adviser Simon Mountjoy of property and business consultants Brown & Co, was to examine each crop gross margin, excluding the SFP.

This was to determine the most profitable rotation without subsidy, explains Ben.

"We soon came to the conclusion that on our land a simple rotation of winter wheat/winter rape/winter



Higher output cultivators worked harder, with ploughing confined to the fallow, is the Atkinsons' revised approach to crop establishment

wheat/fallow and set-aside was the most sensible way forward."

In future the only way to make money from growing crops will be by increasing output, stresses George.

"With the SFP there is no room for bad crops relying on subsidy any longer. For the past eight to 10 years there has been a trend to cutting costs, but now we shall need to go full throttle to increase yields."

The chosen rotation offers scope to do just that, spreading workloads and allowing more timely field operations, especially when establishing crops, the family believes.

All budgets have been done on a "worst case" scenario, which rules out second wheats and peas.

"It was quite shocking, because we have always grown second wheats,"

says Ben. "But when you take the SFP out it doesn't stack up."

The same argument applies to peas, though beans might replace some of the fallow in open autumns. "We shall be flexible. If it turns wet we can always pack up sowing."

Changes in equipment mean the farm has capacity to crop 80-85% of the farm – more in a good season, less in a poor one. "This is a major change in mindset," comments Mr Mountjoy.

Sugar beet growing, for the farm's 1600t quota, is likely to continue as part of the "fallow", but its future is distinctly hazy. British Sugar's £29/t offer to purchase the quota is making us think a bit," says John. "We shall probably carry on with it. But we are very open-minded. We have only 75 acres."

● andrew.blake@rbo.co.uk

Commonsense cross-compliance

CROSS-COMPLIANCE holds few fears for the Atkinsons.

"Having read the various booklets we are fairly comfortable with it," says Ben. "On a straightforward arable farm like ours most of it is commonsense."

Ensuring the land stays in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition poses few problems, he adds. "The DEFRA, RPA and Environmental Agency handbook guides are straightforward and well

written. Again much of it is commonsense."

The main difficulty will be complying with the rule that forbids hedge-cutting from Mar 1 to July 31.

"We normally try to do most of our hedges just before harvest. Now we shall have to adapt to another time to do it. The fallow should help a bit."

Gathering points for the ELS will be essential to avoid losing £30/ha

(£12/acre). "It's a means to an end."

"We have always been environmentally-minded," comments John. "So we are quite happy to take up the new scheme. We have an unbelievable variety of wildlife in the fens which can benefit from the changes. We must be positive."

The more "onerous" Higher Level Scheme is less likely to be taken up. "It probably won't suit our productive land."

Continued on page 8

RIPPINGALE UNDER SFP

- Much simpler rotation including fallow
- Fewer but more efficient machines
- Full-time staff kept but less casual labour
- Environmental hurdles no great concern
- Realistic business planning