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Looking at long-term

ADOPT A PESSIMISTIC attitude and be prepared to be pleasantly surprised, is the Atkinson philosophy, especially when it comes to buying inputs and marketing crops under the volatility inevitable with the SFP.

More long-term contracts are likely as end-users seek security, George believes. "I think millers and maltsters are getting jittery about supplies.

"We are starting to 'grow for the market' a lot more already.

"There's also no doubt that we shall need to look at future marketing and hedging more to lock in to acceptable returns."

Merchants are well aware of the potentially damaging impact of SFP-driven cropping decisions on their own businesses, notes John.

"I'm sure we are going to see a lot more trust deals on things like fertilisers and chemicals," adds Ben.

Reducing the casual labour

CONTROLLING LABOUR costs will be vital in successfully adapting to the SFP, stresses Mr Mountjoy.

"It's going to be a case of all hands on deck under the new regime," says Ben. "We shall certainly be reducing our casual labour requirement."

Until now up to six extra people, mainly students, have been employed during harvest. Now under the changes the team will manage with only one.

Outside busy periods everyone will need to broaden their experi-



The family is keen to hold onto the farm's full-time staff, says Ben.

ence to tackle tasks previously done by outsiders, says George.

"We are all going to have to go on courses to learn and obtain certificates in things like rodent control, chainsaw use and workshop and building skills."

Environmental training to ease the path to the Entry Level Scheme will also be important, he believes.



A simpler rotation with an element of fallow farmed with less but bigger machinery is the post-CAP reform recipe for (from left) Ben, George, and John Atkinson and their adviser Simon Mountjoy. Joining the ELS will be vital, they say.

Changing machinery

THE ATKINSONS' plan to cut the cropped area by about 200ha (500 acres) which should help boost average yield through increased timeliness. But it also requires significant adjustments to the machinery fleet.

The overall policy is to have fewer but higher output modern machines and work them harder, explains Ben.

"That way we can make serious savings, most notably in casual labour."

Already two wheeled John Deere 300hp tractors have been replaced by a 320hp Challenger 765 crawler to join the farm's 550hp 865 model.

"For harvest 2005 we shall run only one combine instead of two – a Lexion 580 30ft cut – with contract help."

A single Bateman 5000 litre sprayer may replace the existing Bateman 24m self-propelled machines, though two can offer more flexibility, especially in the spring, he notes.

Such decisions will generate knock-on savings in grain carting and sprayer bowser back-up.

Larger high-speed carts will replace three older corn trailers.

"If we do predict any operating shortfalls they will be filled by contractors."

Likewise if the changes leave spare capacity the family will try to use it on other farms in a contracting role.

"With less area cropped we would welcome the opportunity to do more," says John.

Cultivation and crop establish-

ment methods will be tweaked with less reliance on ploughing.

The plough will still have a place dealing with the fallow and set-aside, but most crops will get a reduced tillage approach, a new Dale no-till drill being used for the oilseed rape establishment after shakerating.

"With the fallow we shall probably start ploughing in April, which means that with good weathering we could get some fantastic early seed-beds," says Ben. "In fact we could have much of our wheat land worked and ready to drill before we even start wheat combining."

The improved timeliness should boost yields considerably, he believes. "We budget for 3.8t/acre, but hope we can get to 4t/acre."

Another benefit of not ploughing after the rape could be less slug damage. "We aim for a consolidated but non-compact seed-bed, and this is often difficult to achieve after ploughing heavy land."

Other new kit will include a moisture-conserving heavy press, like the shakerator, from Rotherham-based Philip Watkins. "This should eliminate our reliance of expensive power-harrowing. He makes system-built, good strong equipment."

Keeping the bank manager regularly and fully informed about the machinery investments and other financial changes is essential, says John. "He is impressed by our figures and we are confident of our expenditure budgets." ■

Making savings

The chance to spread working windows is where the most savings can be made with the SFP system, says Mr Mountjoy who has advised the Atkinsons for eight years. "So much of what has been done in the past has been driven by the 'big heap' concept." Yield remains important, but growers need to think "bottom up", he suggests. "They need to think what their minimised fixed cost structure can stand before it begins to creak and crop and act accordingly." In that respect the family's moves are well on the way to successfully meeting the challenges of the SFP, he believes.