

Action Countryside – Making the Most of Margins

Phil Jarvis looks at how improved field margin management could lead to increased wildlife and more productive yields



With the pressure of producing food and renewable resources for a growing population, it has never been more important to utilise our arable cropped area as efficiently as possible. However, increased production can lead to deterioration in farmland biodiversity if it is not managed sensitively.

Recent studies have looked at the impact of yield from arable crops as distances increase from the field boundaries. Data collected over the last two harvests from over 50 wheat fields, has revealed some interesting facts.

Using the farm's CX8080 New Holland combine, yield measurements from three seven metre swaths around each field were collected. Yields averaged 7.24, 7.65 and 8.92 tonnes per hectare (t/ha) as distance increased towards the centre of the field and the mid-field yield was 9.41t/ha.

We decided to look at what we can ascertain from these figures, and how can this help production efficiencies and an enhanced environment? The outside seven metre swath of the wheat fields at the Allerton Project yielded 19% less than the average field yield of 8.98t/ha. The mid-field yield was 5% greater than the average field yield.

The phrase 'sustainable intensification' has been used repeatedly in the last few months by politicians and agricultural commentators. Our results would suggest that targeting efficient arable production from mid-field locations would utilise higher yielding areas and still allow buffers around fields to mitigate any potential effect on rural ecosystems. The crop margins would seem to be an ideal place to expand our wildlife habitats

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as they are both lower yielding and closer to the hedges and ditches where much of the natural farmland biodiversity exists. However, this may only be part of the strategy for field margins.

“ Giving farmers more flexibility may lead to more productive wildlife areas...”

The aforementioned ‘sustainable intensification’ could be used in our management of such newly created wildlife habitats. This could include planting high yielding seed and pollen and nectar mixtures with robust, but responsible, fertiliser and spray programmes. Giving farmers the opportunity to be more flexible with environmental stewardship options within the field margins may lead to more productive wildlife areas than poorly managed ‘weedy wildernesses’.

It will also lead to less land being taken out of food production and fewer requirements to compensate farmers for taking land out of arable production. It could be a win for farmers, a win for wildlife and a win for the stewardship budget.

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