



SENTRY

insight

The Sentry Conference 2012

The Sentry Conference 2012: The Necessity for Change

by David Richardson, Conference Chairman

Looking back over the last few of the 21 years of Sentry Conferences the number of times we have placed a question mark after the theme of the event is significant. Back in 2008, for instance, we asked "Can we match the food, energy and environmental challenge?" A year later as the world headed for financial turmoil we posed the question "Commodity and cash volatility – threat or opportunity?" In 2010 as grain prices rocketed to record levels our theme asked "Can farming lead the way back to prosperity?" It turned out to be an appropriate if loaded question as costs later increased faster than ever before and prices fell back sharply. Then last year as we began to prepare our thoughts for the next CAP reform, due at the end of 2013, we wondered whether this would bring "Free markets or support for food security?"

But this year we have omitted the question mark. This year with those initial (although unlikely to be final) CAP reform proposals already on the table, and with a new and more serious financial crisis breaking out almost every week, all taking place against a background of increasing demand for food around the world, we know we can't go on as we are. And it's not just farming that must change if the people of Britain and Europe, never mind the developing world, are to enjoy a viable future. The trouble is, of course, change costs money and a few favoured sectors of society apart it is in very short supply.

It could be argued that the developed western world is paying now for lack of restraint or foresight in the past. Furthermore, the people who will suffer most are those

who did not share in the good times and will be left behind once again. So what can be done? What role should farming and the food industry play? Can scientific breakthroughs in agricultural productivity increase crop yields sufficiently and fast enough to feed a burgeoning world population? Or is it too late? Can the threat of climate change be modified or slowed by changes in human behaviour? Or is that a vain hope as a third of the world's people in China and India begin to covet our western food, water and energy-wasteful way of life?

Yes, we're back among the question marks again and some of the issues our conference speakers will certainly address as they discuss "The Necessity for Change". They occupy top positions in the industries and institutions that affect farming and food. They will present their views, and then listen to comments and questions from the audience. Indeed this event provides an opportunity for those who do not have access to the corridors of power to try to promote their ideas for solutions.

One thing is very clear. There has never been a more important time for good ideas to be considered. This could be the most important of all the 21 conferences we've arranged.





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Bayer Training Day

Bayer Training Day at Sentry Leicestershire by Richard Peck

(Held with the kind permission of Peter de Lisle and family)

Sentry was approached by Bayer to assist in a training programme for 20 of their staff, from senior managers to new recruits. The brief was to increase their knowledge of how a farm business works.

The training task set for the Bayer people was to tender for 605 hectares of predominantly combinable crop land with a few hectares of Sugar Beet. Everything was set up as though this was an actual tender exercise. A tour of the designated land, led by Rob Rouston, outlined the infrastructure and land capabilities, the requirements of the landowner, plus a few additional intricacies to make the exercise realistic. In fact they probably had more information than Sentry would have had if it was a real life tender.

The Bayer employees were split into 4 teams. Each team had a Sentry manager/advisor to guide them through the budget and cash-flow process which would form an integral part of their proposal. Sentry also assisted with particular farming issues such as machinery and staffing.

We allowed five hours to prepare farming strategies, decide the cropping, machinery, staffing and then budget and cash flow the whole package to see what rent they could afford to tender; a big ask in 5 hours!

The groups started with a degree of trepidation that very quickly subsided into concentrated, quiet discussion and intense debate. They worked hard - competitively maybe - but they wanted to get it right. As the deadline loomed, reports were being written, figures checked and the tender figure discussed at length. The session took on a very different feel.

With tenders submitted, presentations were prepared for after dinner. The Sentry team then took each tender and discussed at length the financial offer, the package and how it would be delivered on farm. They were all financially close, and so it would be down to the quality of the presentations to decide a winner.

It was rewarding for Sentry to see how seriously the Bayer teams had taken to the project. The exercise showed the huge costs involved in farming, especially the high cost of machinery and the amount of actual cash needed to run a farm business. It highlighted how small the agrochemicals spend was in the context of the complex package needed to make a modern farm business succeed.

And so to the presentations - they were all good and considerable effort was made by each team to put their case forward and prove they were the most worthy to win the tender. The winning team, assisted by Matt Bell, won by a short head. They didn't offer the highest rent, but delivered a sustainable and well thought out package, delivering almost exactly what the landowner required. Overall a worthwhile and informative day and everyone learned something.

Training for the Future

Training for the Future by Trevor Atkinson

The Sentry Trainee Manager Programme has developed over a number of years to provide focus on the commercial necessity of 'Awareness' and 'Decision Making' across the many areas encountered by professional farm managers.

Our course is based on blocks of 3 days over the quieter winter months and late spring. Component modules are put together by senior Sentry personnel with assistance from external companies who we choose to work closely with, but all of whom share our training ethos and are passionate about their areas of expertise. That may be in operational skills such as field walking, soil management, machinery management, fertiliser usage, cereal and root crop production, or in

business skills such as grain marketing, financial awareness and using management information.

We believe farming is a long term investment and so are our trainees. Our Trainee Manager Programme offers that important link between academic study and the hard commercial reality of farm management. Consequently we are delighted to have an external candidate who specifically asked if he could join us and benefit from our programme.



**Pictured are our 3 trainees this year, L to R
Robert Rockcliffe, Tom Adami and Johnny Colman**



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Crop Husbandry Development Group

Crop Husbandry Development Group Progress Report by John Benton

The Crop Husbandry Development Group was conceived in the Autumn of 2010, and consists of 5 managers, Ben Binder, Alister Farr, Doug Pickup, Trevor Pierce and myself.

The objectives are:

1. To develop and support the targeted yield input strategies for cereals to maximize economic yield
2. Devise and implement a framework to monitor growing crop developments to enable better yield assessment
3. Encourage increased knowledge of all aspects of crop production including; soil management, cultivation strategies and crop nutrition.
4. Support farm field trials in association with industry partners
5. Improve agronomic understanding through training.

Activities/Achievements to date include:

1. A soil management training workshop held in conjunction with Simba.
2. More managers qualifying for Facts, BASIS and Foundation BASIS
3. Light land wheat trials in 2010 and 2011
4. Introduction of the Agronomic Development Programme
5. Ongoing development of the wheat fungicide input strategies

Light Land Wheat Trial

Maximising margins of wheat grown on light land is a challenge faced by many Sentry managers. In order to support and develop growing strategies Sentry teamed up with Agrovista and KWS in 2010. Large plot trials were established at East Bergholt Estate, Essex to investigate current varieties, drilling dates and seed rates. Five varieties were drilled on two different drilling dates. The results, despite the extreme spring drought, favoured the new varieties Santiago and Conqueror for both early and late drillings. The trial is being continued, this year at Troston Farms. On the back of the results from 2011 this year Santiago and Conqueror are being grown alongside Viscount and Solo. Seed rates are being investigated for early drilling with Viscount and Santiago being drilled at 138 and



Viscount – Sown 2nd Sept, 104 seeds/m²

104 seeds/m². The merits of applying new SDHI fungicides for physiological effects are being investigated this year across all plots.

Agronomic Development programme

The agronomic development programme was rolled out across the company last autumn.

Its objectives are:

- a. To monitor and record crops throughout the growing period
- b. To build a record on farm of parameters to optimise future crops
- c. To determine parameters for maximum yield

All field assessments are being recorded by managers on Gatekeeper. This is beneficial in that it builds a knowledge base on farm and also facilitates compiling all of the data to aid statistical analysis, and identify trends from which management decisions can be made. The crops being monitored on farm include Winter Wheat, Winter Barley and Oilseed Rape. Crop parameters being recorded include: soil type, seed rate, TGW, number of plants established, ear count, grains per ear and ultimately final yield. At the end of the season all the data will be analysed and reported back to managers to support and improve decision making.

The whole concept of the development group structure is to encourage like minded managers who have skills and knowledge in specific areas to develop strategies and ensure these are delivered across the company for mutual benefit.

The Crop Husbandry Development Group welcomes input from managers, landowners and advisors to help us continue to optimise margins of crops under our control.



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Crop Husbandry DG Team



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