

# OPINION

## Leaving nothing to chance

I HAVE spent the last three weeks on land we farm from south to north.

I was at the Tillage event at our Down Ampney farm near Cirencester mid-September and have just returned from visiting clients' farms in Aberdeenshire. The variation in farming conditions is worth writing about.

I hope, if I state the south is incredibly dry, there might be heavy rain between writing this and you reading it, I look as out of touch as the CLA president who wrote of welcoming the Secretary of State to the Game Fair in their monthly magazine, when it had actually been cancelled.

In Cambridgeshire, after an easy cereal harvest, our farm managers are on their knees examining oilseed rape which has chitted, had no rain for three weeks and will die if it gets no rain very soon. We have held back drilling wheat for fear of the same thing happening.

Potatoes are being irrigated before lifting to reduce the risk of bruising, but many are being rejected while still unwashed for visible greening, where light has got through the cracks in the soil. Yorkshire is not a lot better, with potatoes at great risk of being bruised but the rape is not (yet?) in as much danger.

In the Scottish Borders, we are experiencing ideal potato lifting conditions, much better than in 2008 when some potatoes were never lifted because the fields were too wet.



CHRISTINE  
TACÓN



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In Perthshire, where we grow strawberries, it rained almost continually during the critical month of July, so both supply and demand were down.

Quality also suffered as strawberries need the sun for taste and texture. However, the sun has now appeared, right at the end of the season, and the plants are giving forth a burst of fruit and we may even hit budget yields now.

It rained every day in August in Aberdeenshire and there was no point trying to harvest cereals

but the first few weeks of September were a gift. Crops were quickly harvested and only used a quarter of last year's fuel requirement for drying. September experienced average rainfall, but it all fell in two days!

As if the weather being volatile isn't enough, cereal prices and currency have been just as bad. Cereal prices have gone from £135/tonne for wheat at the beginning of the year to £85/t at harvest. Currency has gone from one euro being 98p (on December 30 when none of us was looking) to 85p and then back to 90.9p for the all important September 30 when the SFP rate is set.

We had hedged some at 94p and the rest at 92p, but we went from being very cocky about what we had done, to worrying we had got it wrong as the pound weakened in the last week of September.

Volatility is now to be expected and farmers need to be able to survive a year when all of the weather, prices and currency are against us...but we can't leave it to chance and a spread of crops, sales contracts and hedging are essential.

■ *Christine Tacón is general manager of the 24,291-hectare (60,000-acre) Co-operative Farms. She was awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004 and, among other industry roles, was a Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group member.*