

## Byte-sized glad tidings to you

THE Co-operative Farms tends to be leading edge and, as a result, we have probably invested in new ideas ahead of many farms. But there are disadvantages in being an 'early adopter' but we also learn some lessons the hard way.

We now have a plethora of software linked to tasks on farm. Some of it is pretty much industry standard such as yield maps on the combines, but we also have probes to monitor soil moisture which send alerts to a mobile phone when potatoes need more water.

We have maps created from soil cores taken at strategic points around a field and we have two, yes two, totally different methods of auto-steering tractors, sprayers and other machinery.

The issue is that we have invested in technology to do specific tasks, yet much of it is capable of doing far more than what we are using it for; on some farms we have four different pieces of software which could do the same job.

Every farm needs someone who is technology savvy, so they know what the software can do and can see the potential use. But there are also times when the technology can do just the opposite.

On one farm visit this autumn I discovered the fertiliser spreader hadn't worked for a week because the technicians of two different businesses couldn't get the software, which had recorded all the cores for phosphate and potash, to 'talk' to the variable rate spreader.

This is where younger generations, used to playing with software, come into their own.



**CHRISTINE  
TACON**



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It is no surprise manufacturers have seen the potential of adding a few thousand pounds to a piece of machinery for software, such as auto-steering, and to rent out more than one system per farm. The auto-steering has its own benefits; people are less tired and able to concentrate on the task in hand, rather than the line they take.

With a fair degree of autonomy on Co-operative Farms units, different systems have been adopted: we have Claas tractors using three versions of precision guidance, John Deere models using a similar system but with a different satellite, and sprayers using the

EGNOS system, though I understand all these are totally dependent on US military satellites.

We have one farm which uses a removable steering wheel, which means they can use the auto-steer and location software (via a mobile phone SIM card) on different tractors, but one at a time. And we have some farms with both makes of tractors, which are paying for two guidance systems.

Clearly, the fact that within the Co-op our software isn't being used to its full potential, that we are duplicating it and that it can't all talk to each other is a concern.

To address this, we have invested in yet more software, which can get all these systems to talk to each other to help us make use of data.

I recommend those of you, who are at the start of this journey, to check for compatibility when you buy and to ensure you are not buying something which your current boxes can already do.

So where are my glad tidings for the 'old'? Technology is not the answer to everything. No amount of software will compensate for poor attention to the basics of good farming, so keep drainage systems in good order and soil healthy.

Remember what your grandfather taught you about farming and then put the modern computer wizardry on top; the other way round, and you will waste your money.

I wish you all a happy Christmas break and good wishes for 2011.

■ *Christine Tacon is managing director of the Co-operative Farms, part of the Co-operative Group and the largest farmer in the UK.*