

Speed up germination to thwart hungry birds

A renewed focus on getting maize crops ‘in and up’ quickly, to help prevent bird damage, will be more important than ever this spring. A ban on a key bird-repelling seed treatment has limited its availability this season, so we look at the other treatment and cultural options available to producers.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Repelling birds will require more focus this year, since a key seed treatment – Mesuro1 – is no longer available. Bird problems will vary across the UK, with fields close to woodland often hardest hit. So, with the ban on Mesuro1 (its licence is up for review and the manufacturer felt it wasn’t cost effective to renew it), what can producers do to ‘insure’ their investment in maize crops against corvid damage? The good news is that cultural management, to prevent and limit damage – typically caused by crows and rooks – is also conducive to good sowing and early crop management. “Many producers will already be taking steps to prevent bird damage – by getting the crop off to a quick start. And that’s the best defence,” says Limagrain’s Richard Camplin. He says that there will still be a little Mesuro1-treated seed available this year – but not much. “So it’s important to keep that in mind this year, in the run up to drilling, particularly if rooks and crows are problematic on your unit.” These birds are intelligent and will dig up seed – even following the row of the drill – for feed. Mesuro1 made

the seed unpalatable and quickly deterred birds if they did take an interest in the crop. “We’re not suggesting anything new – just that producers make sure they do what they should do when growing maize. In other words, selecting a variety with good early vigour and sowing it at the ideal depth and soil temperature, in a well-prepared seed bed, to ensure quick and strong germination and establishment.”

“Once the seed has germinated and established at the three-leaf stage, it’s safe from bird damage. The birds are only really interested in the seed and, at this point, the young maize plant also has a sizeable root to anchor it.” To get to this stage, as quickly as possible, producers must first select a good growing site: “A field that warms up quickly in the spring – a south facing slope, ideally, and lighter soil.”

Seed-to-soil contact

Seed-bed preparation is also key, to maximise seed-to-soil contact and aid germination. “Create a fine tilth – not a ‘cloddy’ seed bed. And soil temperature, at the depth of drilling and not the surface, should be between 8°C and 10°C for seven days, or more, prior to sowing. “With seed beds likely to be wet and cold this spring, extra attention to temperature at sowing depth will be needed if we are to avoid plant losses. On some units, this may mean drilling a little later – particularly if seed is being sown deeper. Drilling at a shallower depth puts the seed at risk of being stolen by birds and if the soil is too cold it will just be sitting there anyway.”

Mr Camplin says that producers typically drill in early May, with some sowing from mid-April. “This is fine if the soil temperature will support germination. But later, say mid-May, is OK if it means that the seed will be up and away quickly. Speedy establishment is the key here.” “Germination within a couple of weeks will keep the crop safe from bird damage.”



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“Drill seed deeper to keep it out of ‘beak’ reach”



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Maize Growers’ Association agronomist Simon Draper agrees that there are cultural steps that producers can use to mitigate the absence of seed treatment options when it comes to deterring rooks and crows.

“Sowing depth is key and where rooks are a problem then this needs to be below 5cm – the typical depth to which they will dig with their beaks to dig out the seed.” Mr Draper adds that rook damage tends to be devastating as they move in flocks and can quickly decimate a field. “So sow deeper, but not too deep. Soil temperature and seed bed preparation are key here, to ensure that the maize will still germinate – and quickly establish – even when sown at a greater depth.

“And remember that some kit will struggle to drill maize more than 5cm deep – between 6cm and 7cm should keep it out of ‘beak’ reach. So, again, make sure the soil has a good tilth to aid drilling.”

He adds that it’s important to make sure that any seed spillages or surplus isn’t left lying in the field. “This just encourages the birds. It signals that the seed is there in the first place.”

Mr Draper says that it may sound obvious, but it’s still something he sees on farm. “These birds are pretty intelligent. So try to hide what you’re doing – leaving seed above ground is asking for trouble.”

Cultural practices

Another seed treatment that repels birds, Korit, is still available this year, according to Mr Draper. “But its licence expires in 2021 and isn’t expected to be renewed. “There is quite a lot of Korit-treated seed about this year so that’s some good news for producers who have a problem with rooks and crows,” he says. “But this year offers an opportunity to review cultural practices with a view to having no treated seed next season.”

He’s not a huge fan of Korit either, adding that it requires careful handling because it’s less safe for the operator to use.

Force is another seed treatment that can deter birds and it also helps to protect the seed against nematodes, leather jackets and other pests. “The downside is that this costs more than the regular bird repelling dressings. So it’s not for everyone.”

“It’s about tipping odds in your favour – away from the birds,” adds Mr Camplin. “And there are plenty of steps producers can take to protect their investment.” |