

LEAF – benefit the environment and your business

Joining LEAF at a special rate through AF is a great way to showcase your environmental credentials while helping to run your business more efficiently. One member who is benefiting is 2015 Farmers Weekly Arable Farmer of the Year Finalist, Charles Matts.

Charles Matts



Charles is Managing Director of Brixworth Farming, a contract farming joint venture between five farm businesses in Northamptonshire. Wheat, oilseed rape and beans are grown on 2,239ha of mainly heavy land.

Charles decided to join LEAF to add value to Brixworth Farming's oilseed rape. This is grown on contract with ADM to make Hellmann's mayonnaise, fetching a £15/t premium, worth £30,000 per year.

Charles said: "ADM approached us to ask if we would consider becoming LEAF marque certified, to enable us to bid for a contract to grow the rape for their mayonnaise at a premium price, but only if we had the LEAF marque."

While Charles says that achieving LEAF certification requires a big effort, as well as an annual audit, he feels that it is worthwhile.

"One of the attractions to certification is positioning ourselves as an environmentally conscious business. While our website says that we respect the environment, if there is nothing to back this up it can sound like hollow words. The LEAF certification gives us credibility that we are paying attention to the environment and has made us go further than we would have gone otherwise."

A large part of this work has involved using inputs more efficiently to benefit both the environment and the bottom line. "We are using precision farming and automatic boom shut off to put 5% less inputs on the land by targeting them to where they are needed and being less wasteful. We also measure our fuel used per hectare year-on-year and water use. This saves both money on inputs but also has a lot of environmental credentials."

Another key area where both the environment and the business are benefiting is blackgrass control. "When blackgrass first became a serious problem on our farm two to three years ago we sprayed everywhere but this was very costly. We have now adopted a traffic light system to use a lower level of blackgrass control inputs in areas where there is a less of a problem."

The traffic light system maps particular areas of each field red, orange or green to represent the risk of blackgrass based on recent years' experience. Each area is then managed differently through a multi-faceted strategy, involving changes to spraying, machinery, cultivation and hygiene. "I'm not saying we have solved the blackgrass problem, but having attention to detail for a combination of lots of factors has meant that we have had virtually no blackgrass in our wheat this year," Charles said.

Charles is also seeing the benefits of engaging with the public by telling them what Brixworth Farming is doing for the environment and why.

He is particularly pleased with the interest the public showed with his work with Operation Pollinator this year, an international biodiversity program to boost the number of pollinating insects on commercial farms. It works by creating specific habitats, tailored to local conditions and native insects and involved Brixworth Farming planting its field margins with a special seed mixture.

"The whole area has been humming with bees all summer and really captured the public's imagination," Charles said.

So would Charles recommend LEAF to other members? "Implementing changes to meet the LEAF standards does require investment but, as we are a group of collaborating farms, we have been able to spread the cost."

"LEAF certification certainly gives you a feel good factor that you are recognised for how you are growing crops with regard for the environment. That's something I'm sure other members would value too," he said.



Join LEAF for less

LEAF membership is available at a 10% discount through AF.

LEAF aims to balance the needs of consumers, farmers, society and the environment by promoting sustainable farming systems through the use of Integrated Farm Management (IFM). This is a whole farm approach which combines traditional farming methods with the best of modern technologies allowing farmers to achieve high productivity with low environmental impacts.

Integrated Farm Management is geared towards sustaining and optimising the use of all resources on farm through the appropriate use of inputs, smarter business planning and the adoption of innovations and new technologies. This all contributes to increasing productivity while protecting valuable resources such as, soil, water, air, machinery and wildlife habitats.

The successful uptake of IFM requires attention to detail, a very good understanding of the business and an innovative and challenging approach. The IFM framework is based around nine key areas which address the entire farm business, these are: organisation and planning, soil management and fertility, crop health and protection, pollution control and by-product management, animal husbandry, energy efficiency, water management, landscape and nature conservation, and community engagement. Realising the importance of each of these sections is essential for the effective implementation of the framework.

LEAF supports farmers in achieving more sustainable farm practices by offering a range of services and a handbook guide to assist members in meeting these IFM principles. The guide highlights the principles, benefits, the strategy to be adopted and the action to be taken, whilst recognising the site-specific nature of each business. The handbook then helps members to take the next step using LEAF's management tools and technical guidelines.

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Save 10% on LEAF membership through AF

