



Charting the State of British Oilseed Rape Production

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The national winter oilseed rape area hasn't fallen as much as earlier pre-planting estimates suggested. Hybrids have continued to increase their share of seed sales. More than 70 different varieties are being grown this season with just 10 making up 60% of plantings. Gross output differences of fully 0.8t/ha were evident last harvest between the three most popular varieties in the ground. And several key characteristics other than output are being prioritised in growers' variety choice.

These are amongst the wealth of findings to emerge from the industry-leading Kleffmann Group WOSR AMIS@ farmer input panel this spring. A sample carefully structured to be representative of winter oilseed rape growing across the country, the 400-strong panel provides the best available picture of the state of current British OSR production.

"The AHDB Early Bird cropping intentions survey forecast winter rape plantings would fall by 14% to little more than 560,000 ha this season," said Roger Pratchett of Independent Business Resource, responsible for all Kleffmann Group work in the UK. "However, our latest panel data from December and January interviews indicates the actual planted area is 583,000 ha – or only around 10% less than the official 2014/15 area (*Figure 1*).

"Unsurprisingly with current financial pressures, the area sown to farm-saved seed has increased from 9% to 15% this season, with a proportionate decline in certified seed plantings. At the same time, though, hybrids increased their share of the certified seed area to 61% – their highest level in recent years. While the increase in farm saved seed may have suppressed the further growth of hybrids, they continue to make up more than half of national plantings.

"In most parts of the country we see hybrids now representing 60% or more of winter rape plantings – 71% in Scotland," he pointed out. "Pure lines continue to occupy over half the planted area only in East and Southeast England."

The relative standing of hybrids in most regions and across the country as a whole is not surprising given the clear yield and oil content advantages they've shown in their most recent performance.

The 21 hybrid varieties for which the Kleffmann study secured sufficiently good 2015 harvest data yielded an average of 4.21 t/ha at 45.3% oil against 3.98 t/ha and 44.5% for the 18 pure lines. Overall, this meant an average gross output advantage of just under 0.3 t/ha.

Hybrid varieties demonstrated an output advantage over pure lines across all establishment regimes – from classical plough-based systems to simplified min-tilling and direct drilling. Interestingly too, there was markedly less variation between the performance of hybrids across the regimes (0.15 t/ha from best to worst) than pure lines (0.31 t/ha), supporting their claims of greater consistency.

At the same time, the data show marked differences between the two leading hybrids in 2014/15, the most popular variety out-performing its closest rival across all establishment systems and showing particular superiority from direct drilling.

The performance differences recorded across last season's most popular 'double low' varieties – seven hybrids and seven pure lines – underline the lack of clear water between individual hybrids and pure lines (*Figure 2*).

While the top-performing hybrid delivered a higher gross output than all the pure lines, the best pure line out-performed all but this hybrid. And the gross output gap between the best and worst performing hybrids was 0.7 t/ha against 0.6 t/ha between the best and worst performing pure lines.



“This clearly confirms the danger of simplistic hybrid/pure line comparisons,” stressed Dekalb technical specialist, Will Vaughan-France of the market-leading breeder, Monsanto. “The plain fact is that, just like pure lines, some hybrids are better than others. It all depends on the traits they carry and their particular agronomic profiles.

“Amongst of things, our extensive UK and European testing clearly show that some hybrids establish far more vigorously, resist phoma and light leaf spot far better and are very much more resistant to pod shattering than others.

“Under these circumstances, it isn’t surprising that the ‘double low’ standing well above the rest in its 2015 performance – DK Extrovert – is the most popular of the 70+ varieties in the ground for the second year in a row this season (*Figure 3*). The fact that the same three varieties – two hybrids and a pure line – topped the popularity stakes in both 2014/15 and 2015/16 perhaps reflects growers more conservative attitude to risk at a time of intense such pressure on crop margins.

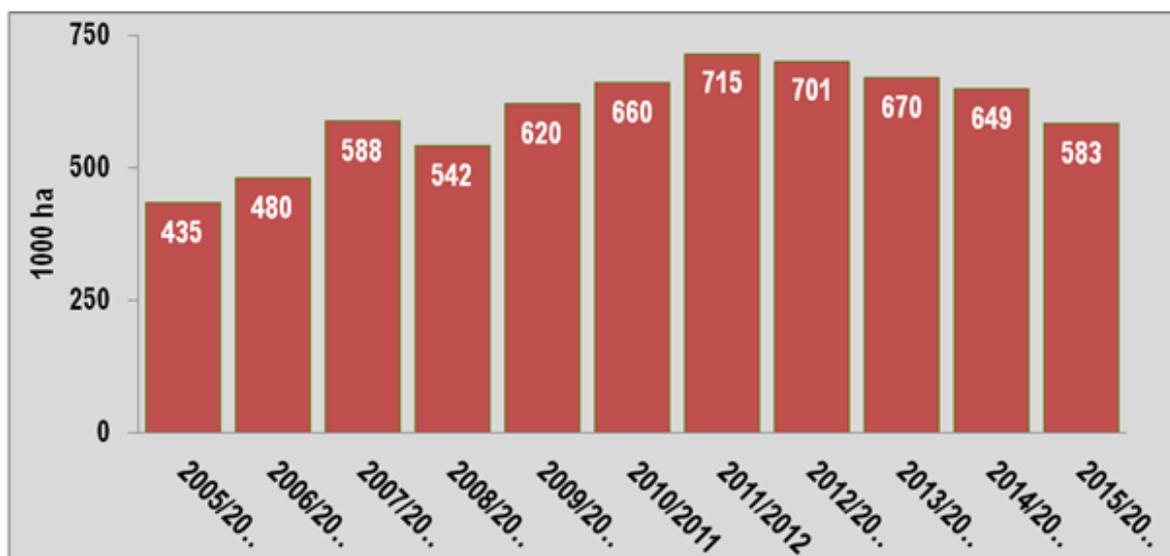
This is reinforced by the finding that growers drilled 60% of current area to the same variety they did last season, with 38% in a new variety – compared with 54 % and 46% respectively the previous year. What’s more, individual variety loyalty rises to over 75% with DK Extrovert.

The popularity of hybrids in general and specific hybrid varieties in particular is almost certainly being driven by the characteristics other than yield the Kleffmann panel shows growers consider most important in their variety choice these days, believes Will Vaughan-France.

“Top of the list here is vigorous establishment, identified by more than 60% of growers,” he said. “Phoma stem canker and light leaf spot resistance are each considered important by just under 40%, with rapid early development also a priority for more than 20%.

“Together with on-farm output, this almost certainly has a lot do with the popularity of DK Extrovert despite the fact that it has never been on the Recommended List or even a candidate for recommendation. Among the leading varieties, it may also account for the fact that DK Exalte is the best-selling new variety of the 2015/16 season.”

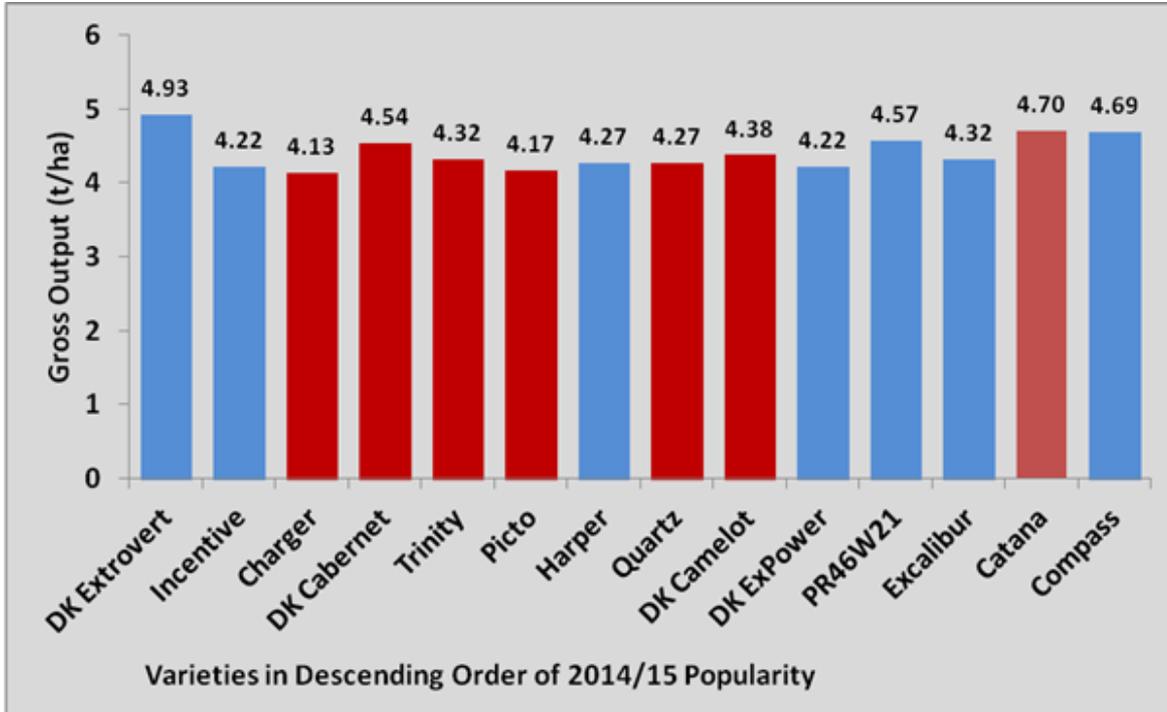
Figure 1: National Winter Oilseed Rape Area



Source: Kleffmann Group & Defra

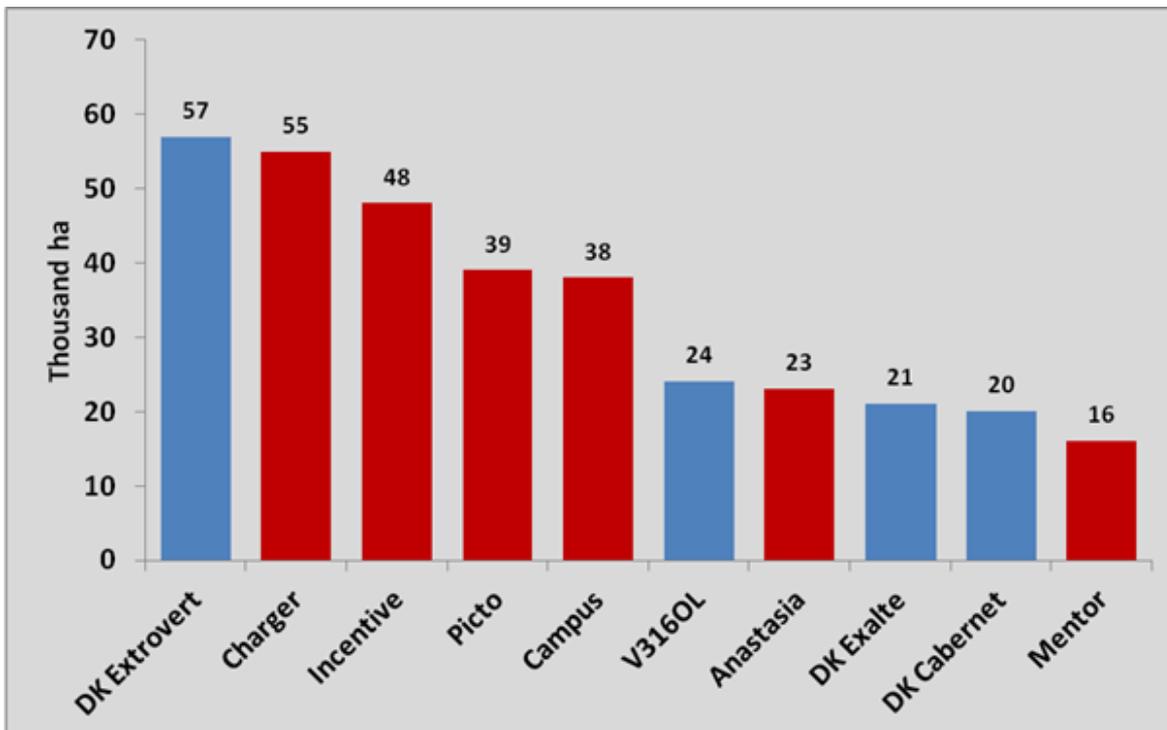


Figure 2: 2014/15 Harvest Performance of the Most Popular 'Double Low' Varieties



Source: Kleffmann Group

Figure 3: Most Popular Double Low Varieties in 2015/16 (market shares of 3% or more)





Source: Kleffmann Group + Monsanto sales data