



TECH FARMER

PRECISION AGRICULTURE

THE PRECISION REVOLUTION:

HOW NEW SPRAYING TECH IS REWRITING THE CROP PROTECTION RULEBOOK

Written by Chris Fellows

The agricultural sector stands on the precipice of a fundamental shift in how crop protection products are applied, formulated and regulated. Driven by rapid advancements in precision application technology, from AI-guided optical spot sprayers to autonomous drones, the traditional model of broad-acre, high-volume spraying is being systematically dismantled. This technological evolution is not merely changing the machinery in the field; it is forcing a complete rethink of agrochemical formulation, accelerating the development of novel active ingredients, and colliding head-on with the shifting regulatory landscape of the UK-EU Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement.

For UK arable farmers, the convergence of these forces presents both unprecedented opportunities for efficiency and significant risks to the established crop protection toolbox.

The rise of precision and drone application

The global agricultural drone market is experiencing explosive growth, projected to surge from \$2.63 billion in 2025 to nearly \$10.8 billion by

2030. While China currently leads in manufacturing and adoption, the technology is rapidly gaining traction across the US and Europe. Drones offer distinct advantages: they can access difficult terrain, eliminate

soil compaction, and operate within tight weather windows when ground conditions might otherwise prevent application.

Simultaneously, ground-based precision spraying is moving from a premium add-on to a standard requirement. Technologies such as Pulse Width Modulation (PWM) enable variable-rate application while maintaining a consistent droplet spectrum, allowing sprayers to adjust output dynamically across a field. More advanced systems, like John Deere's See & Spray and Bosch's Smart Spraying technology, utilise artificial intelligence and machine vision to detect individual weeds and apply herbicides only where necessary. In 2024, See & Spray customers in the US reported average herbicide savings of 59% across corn, soybean and cotton fields.

However, this shift toward ultra-low volume (ULV) and highly targeted application creates a significant challenge for agrochemical manufacturers: the products themselves must change.

The reformulation imperative

Historically, crop protection products have been formulated for high-volume, broad-acre application using traditional hydraulic nozzles. Drone spraying and precision spot application operate under entirely different constraints, requiring much lower spray volumes and higher concentrations of active ingredients.

This transition is fundamentally a reformulation challenge. When active ingredients are applied at higher concentrations in lower water volumes, the physical properties of the spray mixture change dramatically. Viscosity becomes a critical factor; if a formulation is too viscous, it can lead to poor atomisation, increased pump wear and inconsistent dosing. Conversely, if viscosity is too low, the risk of drift increases significantly.

Manufacturers are now racing to develop shear-thinning formulations: liquids that remain stable and viscous in the tank but become fluid under the shear stress of pumping and atomisation. Furthermore, the regulatory labels on many existing products mandate minimum water volumes that are incompatible with drone payloads, creating a regulatory bottleneck that

must be addressed before these technologies can be fully utilised.

A shrinking toolbox and the SPS threat

As the industry grapples with the technical challenges of precision application, UK farmers are facing a more immediate threat to their crop protection arsenal. The proposed UK-EU SPS agreement, expected to take effect in mid-2027, includes a commitment to "dynamic alignment" with EU rules on pesticide regulation.

While alignment could theoretically provide access to new biopesticides approved in the EU, a "cliff-edge" implementation could be devastating. An analysis by The Andersons Centre, commissioned by CropLife UK, warns that immediate alignment could cost the UK arable, horticulture, and sugar sectors between £500 million and £810 million in the first year alone. (Seems a lot given the price of wheat right now; maybe they know something we don't.)

Farmers on TFF have highlighted that a sudden alignment would result in the loss of four new active ingredients recently approved in Great Britain but not yet available in the EU, including the cereal fungicides isoflucypram and pydiflumetofen, and the herbicides cinmethylin and bixlozone. Furthermore, 15 actives currently used in over 100 UK products, such as flufenacet, prochloraz and metribuzin, are no longer permitted in the EU and would likely be withdrawn.

"The prospect of losing access to such key crop protection tools, and hundreds of millions of pounds with them through loss of yield, would be catastrophic," warned NFU Crops Board chair Jamie Burrows, emphasising the need for a phased transitional approach.

Innovation in active ingredients

The dual pressures of regulatory restriction and the demand for precision application are driving a new wave of innovation in active ingredients. With herbicide resistance reported in 75 countries and affecting over 100 crops, the need for novel modes of action has never been more urgent.

One of the most promising

developments is emerging from Cambridge-based startup Bindbridge, which recently secured \$3.8 million to develop a new class of herbicides using targeted protein degradation. Inspired by advancements in cancer therapeutics, this approach uses "molecular glues" to tag specific proteins within a weed for destruction by the plant's own cellular machinery. Because this method degrades rather than merely inhibits the target protein, it has the potential to overcome existing resistance mechanisms and could operate at application rates up to 100 times lower than traditional chemistries. Bindbridge's initial focus is on developing a broad-spectrum replacement for glyphosate.

Meanwhile, established players are also bringing new tools to market. Syngenta recently announced its VIRESTINA™ technology, a fourth-generation ACCase-inhibitor designed to control grass weeds that have developed resistance to glyphosate and clethodim.

The biostimulant and biopesticide sectors are also experiencing rapid growth, with the European biostimulants market projected to reach \$3.08 billion by 2030. Precision application technologies are critical enablers for these biological products, which often require highly accurate and timely placement to be effective.

Conclusion

The future of crop protection is undoubtedly precision-driven. As drones and AI-guided sprayers become commonplace, the agrochemical industry must adapt, delivering highly concentrated, stable formulations designed for ultra-low volume application. While the looming UK-EU SPS agreement threatens to restrict access to vital existing chemistries, it also underscores the urgent need for the next generation of active ingredients.

For the UK arable sector, navigating this transition will require careful management of the regulatory landscape, investment in new application technologies, and a willingness to adopt novel chemistries. The era of "spray and pray" is ending; the era of precision chemistry has arrived.

SPRAY PRECISION

UNDERPINS EFFICIENT DIRECT DRILLING SYSTEMS

In direct drilling systems, every pass carries weight. With fewer opportunities to intervene through cultivation, crop protection strategies need to be both precise and adaptable. As a result, spray application is under increasing scrutiny – not just in terms of efficacy but also cost control and environmental responsibility.

Maximising the performance of each litre applied has become central to success. This means not only selecting the right chemistry, but ensuring it is delivered accurately, consistently and only where required.

A number of key principles now underpin modern application techniques:

- Accurate targeting of inputs across variable field conditions
- Minimising overlaps and misses, particularly on irregular field shapes
- Adjusting tank mixes to suit specific areas or restrictions
- Opportunities for band spraying within row-based systems
- Maintaining optimal droplet size across changing forward speeds
- Keeping boom height stable to reduce drift and improve coverage

These factors are particularly relevant in low-disturbance systems, where residue levels, soil structure and crop establishment methods can all influence spray performance.

With over 50 years' experience in application technology, AMAZONE continues to refine how these challenges are addressed. However, in a direct drilling context, accuracy alone isn't enough – work rates, simplicity and reliability are equally critical. Spray windows can be tight, and technology must support decision-making rather than slow it down.

Ease of operation is therefore a key focus. Integrated software and hardware systems are designed to be intuitive, reducing set-up time and simplifying operation in the cab.

Automation plays a major role here. For example, Comfort-Pack Plus manages the filling process by calculating exactly how much liquid is required for the task, even when working from application maps. This helps to avoid unnecessary leftovers while keeping turnaround times to a minimum. Fast induction rates and automatic cleaning functions further streamline the process.

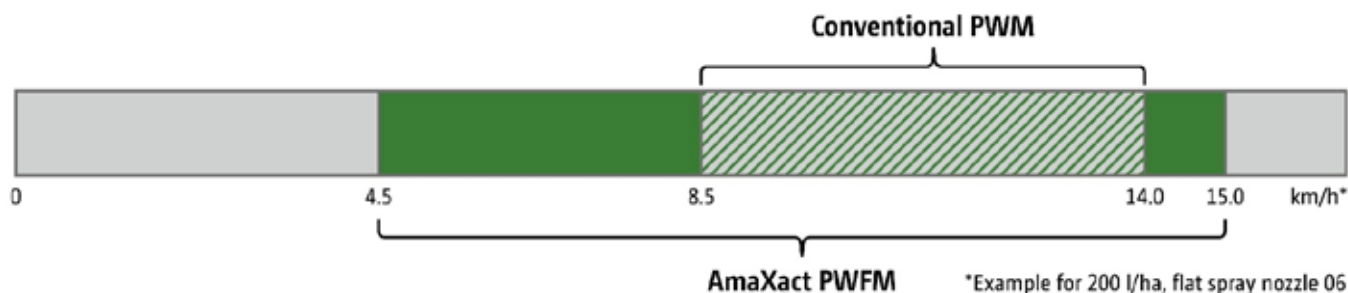
Maintaining the correct boom position is another crucial element, particularly over uneven ground. ContourControl uses a combination of sensors to continuously monitor and

adjust boom height, ensuring it remains consistent relative to the target. This not only improves application accuracy but also reduces the risk of drift. Integrated systems such as SwingStop help to stabilise boom movement, maintaining even coverage across the full working width.

Flexibility in application is increasingly important, especially where field variability is high. DirectInject allows operators to introduce products to the spray mix on the move. This could be used to manage buffer zones without additional passes, or to vary application



The AmaXact system gives improved longitudinal application quality due to its ability to change both the nozzle opening times and the frequency.



The AmaXact PWFm system offers an 87% larger working range in terms of speed and rate

rates across different areas of the field, whether based on crop potential or weed pressure. In systems where mapping and data are already widely used, this level of control fits naturally.

Nozzle management is another area where automation supports consistency. AmaSelect enables automatic nozzle selection based on forward speed and application rate, helping to maintain the correct droplet size at all times. CurveControl further refines this by adjusting output across the boom when turning, reducing the risk of over- or under-application.

For growers incorporating row crops into their rotation, band spraying offers significant potential savings. Systems

such as AmaSelect Twin allow precise application over the crop row, reducing chemical use while maintaining effectiveness. Increasing the resolution of spot spraying, down to 25 cm zones, also improves targeting accuracy and reduces unnecessary application.

More recently, pulse width frequency modulation (PWFm) technology has been introduced with the AmaXact system on UX 01 trailed sprayers. This represents a step forward in maintaining consistent application across a wide range of speeds and conditions. By controlling not just the timing but also the frequency of nozzle operation, the system improves longitudinal distribution and maintains

droplet quality more effectively than conventional approaches. Combined with DynamicFlow pressure regulation, this ensures accurate delivery even under changing field conditions.

For direct drilling systems, where attention to detail often defines success, these developments in spraying technology provide the tools to match inputs more closely to need. The result is a more efficient use of chemistry, improved crop outcomes and a system that supports both economic and environmental objectives.

AMAZONE's sprayer range spans tank capacities from 900 to 12,000 litres, with boom widths from 12 to 48 metres.

A sprayer so advanced it uses up to 80% less chemicals



UX Super trailed sprayer

Capacities of 4,200 l up to 11,200 l. Boom widths from 21 m to 48 m

The Amazone UX is built from the ground up for absolute ease of operation, from the SmartCenter filling station to the unique AmaSelect nozzle control. AmaSelect is a truly set it once system, reducing drift, reducing overlap and targeting spray exactly where it's needed.

- ✔ **Electric four-way nozzle body** - selects the right nozzle size on the move.
- ✔ **Individual nozzle switching** - reduces overlap and wastage.
- ✔ **CurveControl** - maintains even application rates around bends.
- ✔ **AmaSelect Row** - up to 65% chemical saving with band spraying.
- ✔ **AmaSelect Spot** - up to 80% active ingredient saving with spot spraying.



REDUCING NITROGEN FERTILISER USE

By Rosalind Platt, managing director of BFS Fertiliser Services, UK leaders in crop nutrition since 1948.

Late-season foliar nitrogen applications can significantly lower the total nitrogen required in crop production while maintaining – or even increasing – yields. Recent research has shown particularly strong results in oats.

Ongoing volatility in the fertiliser market continues to place pressure on farmers. At the same time, the industry's shift toward Net Zero has encouraged the development of more efficient nutrient strategies. In response, BFS developed a foliar nitrogen product, PolyNPlus.

Following five years of independent trials carried out by organisations such as Niab and Velcourt, along with tramline trials conducted by a number of growers and agronomists, PolyNPlus has consistently delivered positive results. More recent studies on spring oats – now increasingly used as a break crop ahead of winter wheat – have also shown encouraging outcomes.

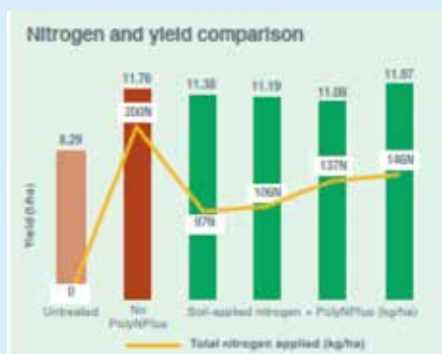
Traditionally, farmers apply soil-based nitrogen fertilisers two or three times during spring. However, nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) from soil applications can fall to around 25% later in the season, particularly in dry conditions.

Long-term research shows that PolyNPlus foliar nitrogen can reduce overall nitrogen requirements without compromising yields. Once sufficient leaf canopy has developed, it can partially replace soil-applied nitrogen. For example, applying 25 litres of PolyNPlus (equivalent to just 8kg of nitrogen) between growth stages 32 and 39 can replace 40–50kg of conventional soil-applied nitrogen. Alternatively, some growers apply two treatments of 15 litres per hectare at growth stages 32 and 37.

PolyNPlus is safe for application to growing crops and can be tank-mixed with fungicides, reducing the need for additional field passes. This improves efficiency while lowering input use.

Trial results support these benefits. A Velcourt study on Crusoe winter wheat in Lincolnshire found that lower nitrogen inputs combined with PolyNPlus produced comparable or improved yields

– see chart. Additionally, replacing 40kg of soil-applied nitrogen with 25 litres of PolyNPlus reduced the carbon footprint



of the third application by 77%.

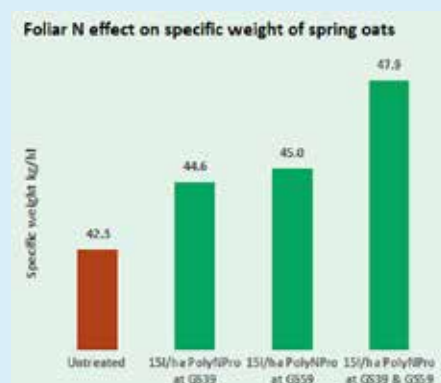
As well as wheat and oilseed rape, PolyNPlus can also be used in oats, applied just before panicle emergence. While oats require adequate nitrogen for optimal yields, excessive nitrogen can increase the risk of lodging. Although plant growth regulators can reduce this risk, they may also negatively affect grain quality.

A recent trial in Wiltshire investigated whether foliar nitrogen could improve efficiency. The crop received a standard 90kg/ha of soil-applied nitrogen alongside fungicide, without a growth regulator. A PolyNPlus product, PolyNPro, was applied at different stages: flag leaf (GS39), heading (GS59), both stages combined, and compared with an untreated control. The findings were promising. Dual applications at GS39 and GS59 resulted in a significantly higher specific weight – see chart.

Further data from ongoing oat trials will be available after this season's harvest.

How PolyNPlus works

Soil-applied urea undergoes multiple biological transformations before becoming available to the plant. These



processes consume energy and reduce the amount of nitrogen ultimately absorbed by the plant.

In contrast, PolyNPlus is absorbed directly through the leaf, leading to much higher NUE. Its formulation includes molecules of varying chain lengths: shorter chains are absorbed rapidly, while longer chains release nitrogen gradually over time. This sustained delivery allows the plant to utilise nitrogen more effectively.

Six different formulations

The PolyNPlus product range is formulated with ureic polymers, sulphur, magnesium, manganese, micro-nutrients and organic uptake enhancers. Uniquely, there are six formulations to meet different crop needs: PolyNPlus Cereals, PolyNPlus ManMag, PolyNPlus High Sulphur, Straight PolyN. Also available with required trace elements for oilseed rape and maize are: PolyNPlus Oilseed and PolyNPlus Maize.

A more efficient future

Foliar nitrogen is expected to play a key role in the future of sustainable farming. It offers a practical and cost-effective approach to improving nitrogen efficiency, maintaining or boosting yields, reducing environmental impact and lowering farm carbon emissions.



Leeb VT



Leeb LT



Leeb CS



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TOGETHER FOR A HEALTHY AGRICULTURE



WHERE INNOVATION GETS REAL: THE EVOLUTION OF CEREALS 2026

Written by Chris Fellows

When you walk into Cereals in 2026 (if you can get in past all the influencers who are going to descend on Diddly Squat), it will be immediately clear this is no longer just a machinery show. Gone is the really big kit, with combines and tractors lined up in neat rows. But look closer and something fundamental has shifted. This is now an event about systems, precision and decisions. The conversations are less about horsepower and more about inputs per hectare, labour per acre and resilience per season. Technology is not being showcased for the sake of it; it is being pushed through a much harsher filter: does it actually make farming more efficient, more profitable or more resilient? From AI-led spot spraying to autonomous field platforms, Cereals 2026 will offer one of the clearest snapshots yet of where UK arable farming is really heading.

The shift is significant because it reflects the reality of modern farming under pressure. With volatile weather, tightening margins and a shrinking labour pool, the industry can no longer rely on simply scaling up traditional methods. The focus has moved from blanket applications to targeted interventions, from operator-led performance to system-led autonomy, and from heavy iron to biological understanding. This transition is not just theoretical; it is visible in every corner of the event, demonstrating that the future of farming lies in the intelligent integration of technology and agronomy.

Precision is no longer optional

The Sprays & Sprayers Arena remains one of the headline attractions, but its focus has evolved. This is no longer just about bigger booms or higher output; the emphasis is firmly on accuracy, waste reduction and operator simplicity. Closed transfer systems like easyconnect are gaining traction, not because they are flashy, but because they solve a

real-world problem: safer handling, less waste and better compliance. Alongside this, nozzle technology, drift reduction systems and integrated software platforms are all converging towards one goal: put the right product in the right place, at the right time, in the right dose. And we are all still asking, "Could drones be the answer?"

But the real shift is what happens when you move from precision application to precision decision-making. The integration of data into these systems means that operators are no longer just driving tractors; they are managing complex, data-driven operations that require a different level of understanding and control.

The rise of "See and Spray"

Camera-led spot spraying is one of the most talked-about technologies at the event, and for good reason. Systems like Techneat's Weed Wizard represent a step change in how farmers think about crop protection. Instead of blanket applications, these machines scan, identify and treat weeds individually. In

practice, that means reduced chemical use, lower costs, less resistance pressure and more sustainable systems.

This is not theoretical anymore; it is working kit, in UK conditions, on UK farms. And it signals a broader direction of travel: inputs are becoming increasingly targeted, intelligent and conditional. The ability to apply herbicides only where they are needed is a game-changer for both the environment and the bottom line, and it is clear this technology is moving rapidly from the fringe to the mainstream.

Autonomy moves into the mainstream

Autonomous machinery has been talked about for years, but Cereals 2026 feels like a turning point. Platforms like AgXeed are demonstrating that autonomy is no longer experimental, it is operational. These machines are not about replacing tractors overnight. Instead, they are being positioned as labour-saving tools, consistency engines and enablers of controlled traffic systems.



For many businesses, the appeal is simple: reliable output without the constraints of labour availability. In a sector where skilled operators are increasingly hard to find, that is a powerful proposition. The bigger shift, however, is philosophical. Farming is starting to move from operator-led performance to system-led performance, where the machine is just one part of a larger, integrated operation.

Establishment tech reflects a changing mindset

Drilling technology on display tells its

own story. Across the board, there is a clear move towards low disturbance establishment, multi-crop flexibility, higher work rates, and compatibility with regenerative systems. Direct drills, angled tine systems and high-speed planters are all competing for attention, but the underlying theme is consistent: do more with less soil movement.

This aligns with wider changes in thinking around soil health, moisture retention and input efficiency. Farmers are no longer just choosing drills based on output, they are choosing them based on how they fit into a broader system. The ability to establish crops reliably while minimising soil disturbance is becoming a baseline requirement rather than a niche preference.

Genetics: The quiet revolution

While the machinery grabs the headlines, some of the most important innovation at Cereals is happening in the crop plots. With hundreds of varieties on display, breeders are tackling some of the biggest challenges facing UK agriculture: drought resilience, disease

resistance, input efficiency and market diversification.

New protein crops and alternative break options are also beginning to gain attention, particularly as rotations come under pressure. This is innovation that does not arrive in a single purchase decision, but its long-term impact on farm performance can be far greater than any machine. The focus on genetics highlights the understanding that technology alone cannot solve every problem; it must be paired with resilient, high-performing crops.

BOFIN will be speaking on the Mainstage at 10:30 on day 2 with a session outlining the science behind three precision-bred cereal varieties and an oilseed rape line that will come into farmer-led field trials during 2026 and 2027. It will explore how the new traits push the boundaries on plant agronomy going forward.

Soil is back at the centre

The popularity of soil-focused features,

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Agronomy Research Circle



including live soil pits and regenerative agriculture zones, reflects a wider shift in priorities. Farmers are increasingly focused on soil structure, biological activity, organic matter and long-term resilience. These are not new concepts, but they are being re-evaluated through a more practical lens. The question is no longer "should we focus on soil health?" but "how do we make it work commercially?"

Technology is playing a role here too, from better establishment systems to improved soil management tools. The integration of these tools into a cohesive soil management strategy is becoming a key differentiator for successful farming businesses.

Water and weather drive new priorities

Drainage and water management have become critical topics, particularly after a run of challenging seasons. Modern drainage systems, mapping tools and installation techniques are being showcased as essential infrastructure rather than optional extras. At the same time, traction solutions such as track systems are gaining interest as farms look to maintain work rates in increasingly unpredictable conditions.

In simple terms, the weather is forcing innovation and the industry is responding. The ability to manage water effectively, both in terms of drainage and retention, is becoming a critical component of farm resilience.

Livestock tech reconnects systems

One of the more interesting developments at Cereals is the growing presence of livestock-focused technology within an arable event.

Virtual fencing systems, such as GPS-controlled collars, are enabling more flexible grazing strategies. This opens the door to integrating livestock back into arable rotations without the traditional infrastructure challenges.

For regenerative systems in particular, this could be a key enabler, allowing farmers to capture the benefits of livestock without the complexity that often comes with it. The ability to manage grazing dynamically and precisely is a significant step forward for mixed farming systems.

Efficiency is the common thread

Across all these innovations, one theme stands out: efficiency. Not just in terms of fuel or labour, but across the entire system. Inputs are used more precisely, labour is deployed more effectively, soil is managed more sustainably, and crops are selected more strategically. The technology at Cereals 2026 reflects a sector that is under pressure, but also one that is adapting rapidly and intelligently.

Top 10 innovations to see at Cereals 2026

- 1 AI spot spraying systems: Camera-led weed detection and targeted application; a major leap towards reducing chemical use with both drones and boom sprayers.
- 2 Autonomous field platforms: Robotic machines capable of consistent, labour-free field operations.
- 3 Easyconnect closed transfer systems: Safer, cleaner and more efficient chemical handling.
- 4 Next-gen precision sprayers:

Advanced nozzle tech, drift reduction and integrated control systems.

- 5 High-speed direct drills: Low-disturbance establishment combined with high output.
- 6 Multi-crop, multi-system drilling tech: Flexible machines capable of handling diverse rotations and cover crops.
- 7 New crop genetics: Varieties built for resilience, lower inputs and changing climate conditions.
- 8 Soil health demonstrations: Practical insights into structure, biology and system performance.
- 9 Virtual fencing technology: GPS-controlled livestock systems enabling flexible grazing in arable setups.
- 10 Track systems for reduced compaction: Improved traction and soil protection in challenging conditions.

The bigger picture

Cereals 2026 is not about a single breakthrough technology. It is about a convergence of changes. Precision, automation, biology and system thinking are all coming together to reshape how farms operate. The most successful businesses will not necessarily be the ones that adopt the most technology, but the ones that adopt the right combination of technologies and integrate them effectively. The real takeaway from this year's event will be that innovation is no longer a bolt-on. It is the backbone of the farm.

However, if none of that appeals, you are sure to find me in the afternoon sun in the Hawkstone bar enjoying the social side of Cereals. As always, say hello and join us for a drink if you see any of our team there.



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