

# Thatching straw harvest and availability 2019

Stephen Letch - Chairman National Thatching Straw Growers Association

Last year's dry growing weather has led to slightly less yields of thatching straw for many thatching-straw growers particularly in the western half of the country that produce combed wheat reed, growers in the eastern half of the country that produce long straw have been less affected.

The National Thatching Straw Growers Association has prepared this report based on information obtained through a number of avenues: consultation and crop reports from member growers; our member's local knowledge of other grower's harvests; and our network of thatcher clients. The NTSGA does not have a strong member representation in the South-West, but we have spoken to thatchers and growers there who have reported the situation to us. However, we cannot claim to have all the information relevant to thatching straw stocks there. The NTSGA has strong representation in Wales, the Midlands, East Anglia and the North, so the information relating to those areas is believed to be comprehensive.

At present, we believe that there are now low stocks of combed wheat reed available so close to the new harvest; most of what is available is taken by thatchers that put orders in with their growers last year.

Long straw will also become less available so late in the year before the new harvest.

Possible measures to help resolve reduced availability of thatching straw occurring every few years

- Thatchers to book and order their straw requirements months in advance: most organized forward-thinking thatchers do this. Those that don't seem to expect the same instant service they get when ordering their foreign water reed requirements, which is simply not realistic.
- Eastern growers to supply wheat sheaves to the West for combing: this is possible but problematic as the eastern growers won't know in which year they should grow more acreage to make up for infrequent crop losses in the West.
- More thatchers to invest in extra stocks in their own yard/a barn or tarpaulin covered stack in a corner of a field so that they have, for example, at least two jobs' worth of materials in hand at any one time: many thatchers could not afford to do this and they would need good rodent control.
- Have more combed wheat reed dealers with large holding barns for thatching straw (as in the past): this would perhaps encourage more small-scale growers into production.
- More smaller/medium-sized growers would help spread the risk of crop failure; which is currently concentrated on a few very big thatching straw farms.
- All growers, big or small, to hold a bank of straw in their barns over and above what they expect to sell in a year: the smaller growers would find this very difficult and could not afford to have 'dead' money sitting there.

These measures above may or may not be useful but they are largely beyond the control of an organization such as the National Thatching Straw Growers Association. However, they are a contribution to the debate about uncertain thatching straw supplies.

So what is the NTSGA about?

The Association is a forum for thatching straw growers all over the country to share experiences and innovation and provide a united voice to speak up for and promote our industry and products. We have a committed focus on research and new developments both in trying to develop new markets for our projects and collecting crop record data and evidence of our operations to help understand our industry better and hopefully improve its resilience and fortune.

We have successfully completed a pilot study on behalf of Historic England, comprising growing trials to monitor and evaluate a range of thatching wheat varieties grown under a range of different husbandry methods at four sites in East Anglia over four years. The Association has recently been awarded a further project on behalf of Historic England, involving the annual monitoring of roof panels thatched with straw produced as part of the first project, to assess their longevity over 25 years.

One of the Association's key aims is to advise growers on more consistent and reliable crop growing, from the selection of the right variety, crop husbandry right through to harvest and the sharing of best practice. We want to channel our knowledge and experience to help others achieve a better quality product that will provide them with a higher return.

The Association aims to pool the individual efforts of members for the good of our industry. Members return a detailed crop report every year to help evaluate good and possible poor husbandry practices. This pooling of knowledge could help make some difference to crops in all but the worst storms. We look at land types, suitable varieties, fertility inputs and crop health. This data is slowly being amassed and will help us look for underlying trends and develop an evidence-based approach to the production of thatching wheats, with the aim of developing a more resilient and secure UK supply chain for our collective good.

If any of this is of interest then please consider becoming a member and adding your efforts for the benefit of the greater good.