

# Thatching straw harvest and availability 2017

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This year's weather has led to less successful harvests for many thatching-straw growers compared with the last four to five years. This situation is not uncommon but is frustrating all the same.

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 is no serious shortage of either combed wheat reed or long straw for thatching work being carried out over the next few months, and stocks should be sufficient until just short of next year's harvest. However some of the least-well-prepared thatchers may struggle to thatch full time in the weeks preceding 2018 harvest.

## Combed Wheat Reed

Growers and producers of combed wheat reed mainly in the west of the UK but also parts of the North and the Midlands, have had reduced yields of regular, straight-stemmed combed wheat and triticale considered by most combed wheat reed thatchers to be the premium product.

Early storms in June and early July this year led to a proportion of standing crops kinking (or becoming dog-legged). This is not ideal for growers as combing partially dog-legged crops leads to more wastage. Furthermore, because partially dog-legged reed can be more difficult to thatch with, most thatchers consider it second best and will not pay top price for it. It produces a slightly more open-textured thatch but this can, in fact, be an advantage in terms of durability and in no way adversely affects thatch longevity. Many growers do have stocks of partially dog-legged straw both left over from last year's harvest and larger quantities from this year's harvest. This will clearly be of great interest to those thatchers who are prepared to use it.

## Long Straw

Producers of predominantly long straw in the eastern half of the UK were less affected by this year's poor weather, and those that were tended to be the ones that used less traditional methods of harvest.

As every grower knows, producing long straw from a crop is less challenging than achieving a premium-selling combed wheat reed product. This is because partially dog-legged long straw is not significantly more challenging to use than regular long straw on authentic traditional long straw thatching works.

The acreage of long straw production in the East has been slowly reducing over the past 4 years and at the same time there has been increased tonnage being exported out of the region year on year. Growers in East Anglia in particular have seen local trade diminish mainly because the quality of long straw thatching in the past few decades has left roofs lasting 30 plus years before full re-thatch is required.

## Are thatchers crying "wolf"?

The National Society of Master Thatchers Ltd have sent out a snap-shot availability survey to straw producers for this year only, to help their members plan the next few months thatching requirements before the 2018 harvest comes in.

A number of straw thatchers and growers do have some concerns that the findings of this snap-shot survey could fuel calls from some thatchers for straw roofs to be replaced with water reed thatch, citing lack of combed wheat reed and long straw availability, which is not a true reflection of the situation. While the survey is helpful in providing some details it is important to listen to all points of view.

#### 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 (that don't want the hassle of dealing with fickle thatchers) 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.