

Rob Atkin – Atkin Farms, Field, Staffordshire & South Staffordshire Water

Atkin Farms is located in Field, Staffordshire and is a 930 acre mixed farm, 80% arable and 20% grassland. It is situated north of the Blithfield Reservoir and has the river Blithe running through the farm alongside several of its fields.

South Staffordshire Water (SSW) supplies water to 1.3 million people, covering an area of 1,490 square kilometres. The water supply is taken from groundwater and surface water sources, meaning that the quality of the water can be affected by activity that takes place on the land and in rivers within the catchment area.

SPRING is an Environmental Protection Scheme that has been set up by SSW that aims to support local farmers in the Blithe catchment area who are interested in exploring catchment friendly land management. Under this scheme, farmers are able to apply for grants of up to £10,000 per farm, helping towards the cost of voluntary on-farm infrastructural improvements and land management options designed to protect the environment and improve water quality.

Claim for Non-Capital Items:

FIELD OPTION	SPRING rate
Slug pellet – use of Ferric Phosphate	£1.00/ha reduced price kg used
4–6m buffer on cultivated land	£350.00/ha
12–24 watercourse buffer on cultivated land	£515.00/ha
Flower-rich margins	£545.00/ha
Wild bird seed mixture	£580.00/ha
Cover crops	£70.00/ha
Contour cropping	£10.00/ha

For many of the measures, Rob says ‘I’d be doing them anyway’, even without payment. This is especially true of the 4-6m buffers on cultivated land. “For us it’s more of a weed control because there isn’t a good yield from crops grown down the side of the hedge, because the hedge absorbs the water and shadows the crop.” Additionally, the farm has a shoot and 6m margins allows for the game keeper to have better access. SSW prefers for the farm to grow old fashioned swardy

“I know it is working, I wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t.”

Rob Atkin is a trial farmer for SSW, helping to test new and innovative ideas that could be rolled out into the greater SPRING scheme.

Rob’s involvement began with a free survey carried out by Natural England and SSW, who produced a report that highlighted what they thought could be done on the farm to improve land management for water quality. Rob then chose what options the farm wanted to pursue, carried out the work and gave SSW the receipts and received payment within 90 days. The farm was then given a senior catchment adviser that liaises with the farm over options that are available to them.

Below are tables of some examples of such options along with the payments that farmers are entitled to. Those in bold are currently implemented on Rob Atkin’s farm.



rather than up and down, thus slowing water flow along tramlines and increasing infiltration rather than causing run off. Drilling shortways can be time consuming but they are incentivised via the payment and the knowledge that this will result in cleaner water.

SSW encourages strip tillage rather than ploughing in an effort to keep sediment out of the water and reduce run off and soil movement. The farm is trialling the use of a Mzuri strip till drill. This drill was bought by SSW but is used by Rob for free on approximately 100 acres and by other farmers for £50 a hectare, though there is £25 a hectare subsidy off that for farms that use it. This drill is a conservation farming method that improves soil moisture and organic matter content whilst reducing soil erosion and run off, both which negatively impact on water quality. On the remaining 800 acres, Rob has done min till since 2003 but does sometimes plough to control brome and blackgrass.

grasses that encourage bugs and beneficials and the farm trial different mixes to see which give the best results. The farmers are allowed to keep the margins topped and maintained and if there’s an issue with nettles or thistles SSW will allow for them to be sprayed out.

Tramline management has been an option which works for the farm. Tramlines on sloping fields are placed with the contours,

Claim for Capital Items:

CAPITAL OPTION	New SPRING rate
Resurfacing gateways	£90.00
Livestock troughs	£100.00
Cross drains	£230.00
Gateway relocation	£320.00
Check dams	£42.00
Coppicing bankside trees	£25.00
Permanent electric fencing (inc. posts)	£4.50



Work in progress – Rob has been able to build a biobed with funding from SSW.

The differences in drilling methods have had limited effect on the establishment or growth of crops, as seen in the table below:

Method	Drilling costs	YIELD
Mzuri	£28/ac	1.90t/ac
Min Till	£38/ac	1.95t/ac
Conventional drilling*	£44/ac (average)	n/a

*Conventional drilling was not carried out on Atkin Farms, cost information added for comparison.

The trial achieved a loss in yield with the Mzuri method compared to the min-till method, but changes to no-till practices can take years to see improvements, so a negligible loss in the first year of use was encouraging for SSW.

Additionally, with the Mzuri strip till being a single pass method, the input costs have been reduced by £10/per hectare despite the process being slower.

In order to demonstrate to people the different options and results that arise from them and to discuss what pesticides are currently of concern to SSW, the farm hosts farm visits and walks for other local farmers. The latest event attracted 90 people, with

many of the attendees looking to get involved with SSW.

The farm has also installed a biobed with a sprayer wash down system. This includes a new shed for spraying, filling and washing with a tank underneath that collects all of the waste, which goes into another tank that pumps into the biobed. This was a new project build and SSW gave the farm a payment towards it per square metre. The cost of the pesticide filling and handling area is contributed towards by SSW and for Rob this worked out as 50% of the total costs, which he says could've been higher but Rob decided he wanted to be in control of the materials used. The filling and handling area is again

something Rob says he would have looked to do himself and there are some grants available through DEFRA, but SSW funding meant he could do it sooner rather than later.

This is the fourth year of the agreement on Atkin Farms. There are currently 80 farmers in the catchment and SSW are looking to get more farmers involved. However, Rob says his biggest worry is the funding,

“ I know they (SSW) are a private company; the funding will get stretched over more farms. And farms will then struggle more and more every year to get to the full £10,000.”

Rob says that the works are not overly burdensome, making it far simpler than the previous involvement with the Entry Level Stewardship. Additionally, Rob is actively involved with the planning and designs of the options, saying he is given flexibility over what is available and sometimes helping to offer solutions that aren't immediately obvious to the catchment adviser.



Shed for spraying, filling and washing



Chemical washing sink with drainage into biobed



Chemical storage container with metal shelving



Chemical storage box provided by SSW

POLICY ASKS

Politicians need to look at projects or schemes that are already in place and try to replicate them. Work with farmers and growers, who know best, and let them help with decision making, rather than imposing. Also, look at individual areas too, as problems are different for different areas.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

<https://www.south-staffs-water.co.uk/environment/catchment-management/spring>

[Mzuri strip till drill](#)

<https://www.south-staffs-water.co.uk/environment/catchment-management/spring/catchment-trial-farm>

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