

PUBLISHED **WEEKLY**

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Vol. 14 No. 10

12 March 2021

AgriTrade News

ESSENTIAL INSIGHT INTO THE UK AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY INDUSTRY



New look for LSPB reflects wider crop portfolio

LS Plant Breeding may be one of the newer UK plant breeding companies, but it has a long background in the European seeds sector. New managing director Chris Guest (pictured), who succeeded founder Theo Labuda in June 2020, explains how the business has developed to its present wide variety portfolio.

LSPB was established in July 2005 under former CPB executive Theo Labuda, following a series of changes in the European seed industry. It moved to its present trials site located north of Cambridge the following year.

NPZ Lembke and Serasem (the 'L' and 'S' in LSPB) created the new business to manage their oilseeds programmes in the UK with Craig Padley, who is now the oilseed and pulse breeder with the company. Around the same time, RAGT Semences had bought Monsanto's UK plant breeding operation – but RAGT already had a spring barley breeding programme and needed to divest the UK spring barley operation – therefore Serasem bought the business and its two breeders for LSPB.

LSPB was thus launched with oilseed rape and spring barley programmes. Over the next couple of years, it added Serasem's other cereal crops – wheat, winter barley and oats – and started pulse breeding using NPZ and RAGT material.

In 2010, RAGT acquired Serasem, and took the UK wheat, winter barley and oat programmes back in house, but not the spring barley, as the programme's breeders were employed by LSPB. Therefore, LSPB operates spring barley breeding, testing, and trialling on behalf of RAGT, now working alongside the RAGT spring barley breeder.

Oilseeds, pulses and cereals

On oilseed rape, LSPB runs the UK selection, testing and trialling for NPZ, along with joint breeding work of NPZ/RAGT. There is also testing of some joint breeding work with DSV & BCS. Hybrid oilseed varieties benefit from breeders collaborating over a wider gene pool – although the resulting varieties are marketed by individual companies. The current AHDB list has LSPB varieties that feature phoma resistance, clubroot resistance and specialist varieties for the HEAR market.



LSPB's pulse breeding is based on RAGT pea lines and NPZ's field bean work. LSPB has been highly successful with spring beans, with Lynx a market mainstay. It has seen similar success with combining peas, including the new top-yielding marrowfat Akooma.

For cereals, LSPB manages a winter wheat programme on behalf of Wiersum Plant Breeding (WPB) from Holland and W. von Borris-Eckendorf from Germany, which is part-owned by NPZ. WPB has a long association with NPZ and has existing varieties of spring barley and spring oats programmes represented in the UK.

The company is trialling near-market WPB spring wheat material, with WPB Escape making the AHDB Recommended Lists last autumn as the highest yielding spring wheat.

Move into breeding mainstream

Mr Guest believes this spring wheat success is a stepping stone into the wider cereals markets. With its own



programmes, and contract work for other companies, the company is now a more rounded breeding business that has grown to a current team of 10 and a commercial variety portfolio of oilseed rape, field beans, combining peas and now cereals.

The winter wheat programme is getting closer to commercial viability. Three varieties entered official trials in 2019 and one in 2020. The programme is targeting the feed wheat market initially, as it is the largest market. But it is also exploring more quality and disease profiles – particularly in selecting for Septoria resistance – which is an essential trait in the UK and Ireland markets. ▶

► New look for LSPB reflects wider crop portfolio

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Break crops will remain the significant part of LSPB's business. Mr Guest says the UK needs an annual oilseed rape area of some 500,000 hectares, yielding an average 4 tonnes/ha to meet its domestic crush capacity and demand. He expects the present crop area to recover from its current low, but growers will need to focus on oilseed rape as the best break crop on a gross margin basis, rather than cash crop, with less intensive rotations than used in the past. LSPB has the variety Respect on the AHDB Recommended List and Flemming in recommended list trials, both with a new major phoma resistance gene called RLmS that brings high resistance to Stem canker, along with the clubroot-resistant varieties Crome and Croazer, in addition to the described HEAR variety Resort.

A smaller oilseed crop increases the potential for pulse break crops. There is growing food chain and Net Zero pressure for more sustainable home-grown feed protein sources to replace

imported soya. However, to achieve this, the UK needs to improve supply volumes and product consistency of UK-grown pulses.

One innovation on this front are LSPB's low vicine/convicine (LVC) spring bean varieties already on the PGRO Descriptive List. They can give wider marketability for both for the human consumption and the animal feed market by removing these anti-nutritional compounds. Importantly, varieties featuring the LVC benefit come with comparable yield and agronomic performance for growers.

Lastly, an LSPB winter bean programme is under way, bringing different germplasm to the UK market. The first variety will potentially be available in autumn 2021.

Fresh new look

LSPB rebranded recently, a fresh look that Mr Guest says has been well received by the trade, with

its 'Combining Excellence' strapline underpinning the company's intention to be transparent and honest about a variety's overall package – including weaknesses as well as strengths. It also focusses on innovation with excellent varieties and material at or near the top of lists - particularly spring beans, yellow, green and marrowfat peas and hybrid oilseed rapes.

"I'm excited to continue to build the resilient business that Theo has developed over the last 15 years on behalf of shareholders. As a team we will be taking it forward in a period of rapid change for UK agriculture, and can see the opportunities with a wider portfolio of varieties, now including the winter and spring wheats in our pipeline," says Mr Guest.

"There will be challenges – not least the pandemic disruption – but I feel the business and its current breeding programme is well set to go forward for the next decade." ■