

Oilseed Rape in Ireland

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Although winter oilseed rape was grown very successfully experimentally from 1975, it was not until 1980-81 that any substantial commercial area was sown. The area increased from 400 ha in 1981 to approximately 5,000 ha in 1985 and further expansion was envisaged. However, a very poor harvest in 1986 undermined confidence in oilseed rape and the area sown has since declined. Since all rapeseed grown in Ireland is exported for crushing, the export figures below clearly show the production trends of oilseed rape in Ireland.

Year	Tonnes exported
1963	7.500
1984	15.000
1985	14.000
1986	6.000
1987	13.000
1988	8.000

While yields in excess of 4,5 t/ha are attainable, the average farm yield of winter oilseed rape is approximately 3,0 t/ha, with oil contents in the range of 38-42%. The 800 ha of spring rape grown in 1987 and 1988 produced 2,2 to 2,8 t/ha. The first winter variety grown was Jet Neuf which was later replaced by Rafal. In more recent years, Bienvenu is the most popular variety. The new

double low varieties Ariana and Liradonna were grown for the first time in 1988. Preliminary results suggest that the yields were 6-12% lower than Bienvenu.

Despite the high returns from oilseed rape in the early 1980's, the area sown never reached expectations. All the reasons for the slow expansion, and more recently the decline in production, are not easily identified. Among the more important reasons are:

1 - the difficulty in sowing early due to the relatively low area of winter barley and the late harvest of spring barley;

2 - the eelworm problem, oilseed rape could not be easily grown on farms committed to sugar beet;

3 - the small farm size makes it difficult to organize a four-year break between rape crops;

4 - summer storms are a feature of the Irish climate, resulting in big seed losses just before harvest. Low temperatures and high rainfall at flowering has reduced yields in some years.

Over the past two years, the substantial reduction in the EC-support price, and more precisely the inability to predict confidently the actual selling price twelve months in advance, together with the introduction of the double low standards, have led to a loss of confidence by growers in winter oilseed rape. Spring oilseed rape production is increasing, but is unlikely to make up the area lost to winter rape production.