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A Challenging Season

As I sit writing this newsletter (20th Dec) the rain is pounding relentlessly on an already soggy Essex. No doubt that this autumn and winter has been challenging compared to the relative luxury of the previous two years. The flexibility to delay winter wheat drilling was beginning to have an impact on blackgrass and you could be forgiven for wondering “why haven’t we always done it this way?” and then the reminder came... The rain started in October just as many had aimed to start drilling and every time field conditions recovered it seemed another downpour would arrive. By the end of October we had recorded just under 100mm of rain, which is not far from double the long term average and so things started looking desperate.

By the middle of November field drains had started to run, a point there is rarely a return from at this time of year. In this part of the UK while it has been undoubtedly tough, we’ve been relatively fortunate compared to other areas and by making the most of every opportunity, I’ve heard that only around 10% or so of land destined for winter crops has remained undrilled. With desperate times come desperate measures and I’ve seen some things that, with my catchment advisor eyes on, have left me a little uncomfortable. Machines up to their axles in soil, tramlines like rivers, sprayers out in questionable conditions and trenches being dug in a desperate attempt to drain waterlogged fields.

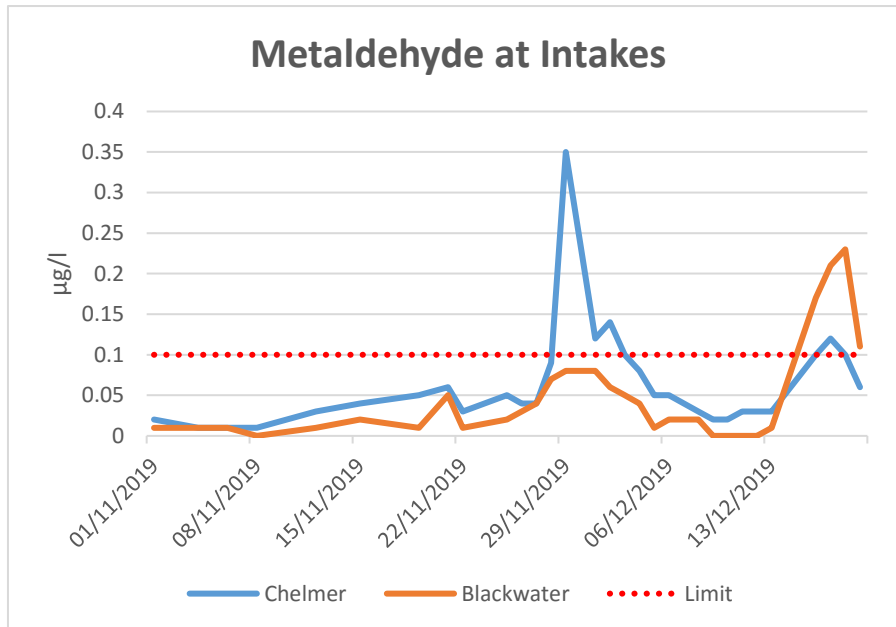
From a water company’s perspective, rain is exactly what we need right now as we attempt to refill reservoirs in preparation for summer on the back of two dry autumns, yet we find ourselves in a slightly unusual situation. The ferocity of the rainfall means that when it does come it smashes against the soil rapidly mobilising any pesticides that, until that point have remained relatively untouched. Meanwhile the ground quickly becomes saturated and drains start running pulling residual nitrogen out of the soil in one big turbid torrent. All of these things are problematic for drinking water treatment and so we can end up rejecting the water to prevent contamination. In addition the flows are often significant but short lived, meaning that pumps can struggle to pick up all that *is* available.

There’s no denying that farming is a trying business and flexibility is essential, this year is a reminder that no two seasons are the same. All you can do is draw on experience; a lesson learned once maybe 10 or more years ago might suddenly become relevant again. It is that local knowledge that we need right now as on both sides as regardless of how you feel about climate change, we need to be able to develop resilience and adaptability in the face of the extremes of weather that seem to have become the norm. This resilience starts with the soil, a good soil structure will aid drainage and increase field capacity. Aiming to increase organic matter in the long term will help improve structure and help prevent loss of nutrients and pesticides. In addition this will aid the slower release of nutrients when the crop needs it.

As with our eating habits over Christmas, a small period of sin can seemingly take a disproportionate amount of time to recover from and the same is true for looking after our soil. We need to put the emphasis on farming soils rather than a single year of crops. In 2020 Essex and Suffolk Water will be launching a scheme that will provide support to farmers where it is needed to make the right decisions for farming, water and the environment, so keep an eye out for further communications.

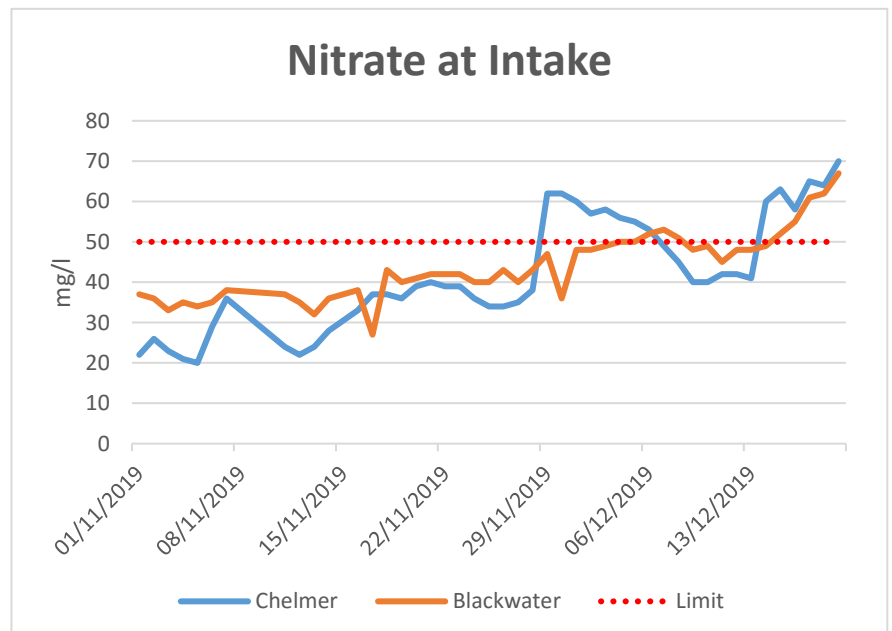
Water Quality

In spite of the above, pesticides have remained fairly low, though data beyond the start of December has yet to be reported. Some peaks in propyzamide (Kerb) are now being observed across the catchment as herbicide applications are being made to WOSR so please be mindful of where this product will end up if sprayed in sub optimal conditions and question whether it will be working effectively.



Metaldehyde has certainly been more prevalent than in previous years, though in the Chelmer & Blackwater has not been as problematic as in other local catchments. I would like to think that this is down to growers in the area being very conscious about this product, observing best practice and I know many of you are already using ferric phosphate.

Nitrates are probably the biggest operational concern in the catchment. It is recognised that this is not solely from agriculture and work is also underway to address these additional sources. However there is a lot that can be done in agriculture to increase the efficiency of nitrogen use from both bagged and organic sources. In addition note that the drinking water limit for nitrogen is much higher for nitrate and measured on *milligrams* not *micrograms* per litre. This means that the losses from fields will equate to kg/ha. As such I will be looking to learn more about nitrogen losses in the catchment by setting up some field trials. If this is something that is of interest to you please do get in touch.



New Website

I am currently working on a new website which will hopefully become the hub for all Chelmer & Blackwater catchment communications.

Once launched in the New Year the website will be found at the new address:

www.chelmerandblackwatercp.com.

Challenges and Choices Consultation

The environment agency have launched a consultation seeking your views on the challenges our waters face and the choices we all need to make to improve and protect this vital and precious resource.

Your responses to this consultation will help shape the future approach to managing the water environment and will be used to update the existing river basin management plans in 2021.

The Challenges and Choices consultation seeks your views on:

- the challenges that threaten the water environment
- how we can work together to manage our waters
- who should pay

The Agency's 'Small Changes, Big Picture' films are online now to help you learn about the challenges facing water today and what you can do to help. Search 'Environment Agency – Small Changes, Big Picture' on YouTube to find the film.

The Environment Agency invite you to submit your views to then via the link below. The closing date for receipt of your comments is 24 April 2020.

<https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/environment-and-business/challenges-and-choices>

Dates for Your Diary

Farm Business Updates – Writtle University 22nd January 9:30am

The popular event is back for the 10th year running and so it would be fantastic to see as many of you as possible there for this milestone.

The guest speaker at Writtle this year is Nuffield Scholar Mike Ratcliff talking about how technology already in use across other industries could play a vital role in the future of farming. In addition there will be talks from: the Environment Agency, Catchment Sensitive Farming, the NFU, Championing the Farmed Environment and Essex & Suffolk Water.

If you can't make this date there are others across the region so please see the enclosed flyer for full details.

NRoSO and BASIS points will be available.

Booking is essential so please do so via the below contacts:

Email: east@cla.org.uk

Phone: 01638 590429

The Chelmer and Blackwater Catchment Partnership is supported by:

