

Early seed tattie harvest wrapped up thanks to 'golden' fleece

BY JOE WATSON

Using a fleece has helped a Moray seed potato grower harvest a crop destined for Thailand and Indonesia a fortnight earlier than normal.

Higgins Agriculture, based at Alves, near Elgin, has used the fleece - the same type as put over turnips to avoid pest attacks - on nearly five acres of Atlantic.

It follows a trial last year on small mini-tubers which went well. General manager David Chalmers said the exercise had again this year been a huge success, both on the commercial seed crop and on nearly an acre of mini-tubers.

He added: "I'm not sure I would claim any benefit of pest control from the fleece as it is on for a short period of time, although it obviously does prevent attack when in place.

"We grow around 30 hectares (96.3 acres) of Atlantic on the farm and more on contract growers' farms across Scotland. We are in the earliest area of Scotland which is why we have such an advantage in early exports, such as to Thailand. The rest of the

"We are in the earliest area of Scotland"

crops are around two weeks behind the fleeced section."

Mr Chalmers said the area of Atlantic under fleece next year would be expanded again to continue to evaluate the commercial benefits to the family-owned business, which has its headquarters near Doncaster.

He saw the biggest ben-

efits of the fleece as the earlier harvest and shipping to customers, allowing harvest to be spread over a longer period and being finished early which was always a key target for seed-potato growers and an increase in the saleable yield of the crop by 12.9% or 1.79 tonnes an acre.

Mr Chalmers added: "We think it will enhance the physiological age of the resultant crop which will give our customer an earlier crop when grown in Thailand which will be a huge benefit to them."

The fleece comes at a cost of £512 a ha (£207.02 an acre), assuming it can be used over two growing seasons, although the hope is for three. It was applied two weeks after planting and in the wake of herbicide being applied. It was on the Atlantic for three to four weeks, with the crop benefiting from it in much



NEW CROP: Export sales manager David Scott shows Daruphun Sansiriphun, agronomy manager of Berl Jucker Foods, Thailand, the newly harvested Atlantic seed potatoes. Photographs: Gordon Lennox

the same way as plants grown in a greenhouse with the fleece helping retain heat in the soil.

Mr Chalmers said Higgins was looking at ways of mechanising the fleece application process to cut labour costs. He added: "We think we can get the fleece on earlier next year, the constraint this year was

availability of labour as we were still grading seed."

The Thai customer who will be receiving the fleeced seed visited Higgins earlier in the week to see the crop being harvested as well as the firm's storage facilities and its mini-tuber operations.

Higgins is among Scotland's largest seed tattie

growers with 617 acres, much of which is grown with a joint-venture partner. That gives it between 8-9,000 tonnes of seed annually. About 70% of that is exported to destinations globally. There are 14 full-time staff in Moray, which is boosted by 10-12 part-time employees at harvest and during grading.



Inga Gardhuskene sorting the potatoes during harvesting



Harvesting of the Atlantic crop under way at Alves