Invest now to secure bright potato future

- Lack of investment in potato storage is hindering industry progress
- Get to grips with storage costs a tonne to increase competitiveness
- Improved airflows for relatively small cost will save crucial CIPC

By Adam Clarke

Confidence in the potato sector is low and has led to a lack of reinvestment in storage infrastructure in recent years.

But growers committed to the crop in the long term are urged to pluck up the courage and capital to improve their facilities to reduce losses, cut costs and maximise returns.

About 3.25m tonnes of potatoes go into storage each year and AHDB Potatoes estimates just 20% go in to what are considered state-of-the-art, modern stores.

Adrian Cunnington, head of Sutton Bridge Crop Storage Research, says only those producers who have built the best relationships with processors and packers have invested in storage.

He adds that this has left a long tail behind that have stores coming to the end of their working lives that are not as good as they should be.

"The industry needs to ensure there is sufficient return from storage and a continuity of supply for the future, which is in the interests of everyone.

"It is an area that doesn't get enough emphasis and there needs to be more trust between suppliers and markets, which will provide a better basis for making long-term decisions, such as investing in an expensive store," he adds.

TIM SCRIVENER

REPAIR OR REPLACE

Whether growers should build a new store or upgrade an old one will depend on the businesses. Mr Cunnington says a good place to start is an assessment of existing facilities.

The relationship with the farm's customer is again an important element and it can often provide technical expertise to advise growers on their storage requirements and what would be best in a given situation.

However, some growers like to "paddle their own canoe" and come to independent sources for advice, or carry out a self-assessment.

Guidance for potato storage self-assessment can be found in the AHDB *Store Managers Guide*, which offers a step-by-step audit of how well the store is performing.

"Whether there is scope for improvement of an old store will depend on what you have there already.

"For example, where you have a solid steel structure, you may not need to dispense with it. You could perhaps just upgrade insulation, ventilation systems or install a vented floor," explains Mr Cunnington.

Ray Andrews of Norfolk storage specialist Crop Systems – which carries out store audits, design and construction – says there are many poor-quality stores in use, but with a bit of care about half of them could be made suitable.

He says one of the critical factors is addressing airflow, with some poorly performing stores having as much as 80% of the air going through just 40% of the crop.

"That means 20% is going through the rest, so you are overblowing the majority of the crop to

Five storage essentials – old and new stores

- **Leakage** – get an existing store assessed for leaks. Up to 50% of your costs could be caused by leakage in the worst cases, so make sure the building is sealed to ensure only internal crop issues dictate energy use.
- **Equipment** – it is essential to have an automated control system capable of controlling fan speed and monitoring and maintaining the correct CO_2 levels within the store.
- **Air distribution** – the whole performance of a store is governed by air distribution. In a bulk store, tapered ducts and laterals that deliver air underneath the floor will help this. In a box store, consider a suction wall designed to produce positive airflow.
- **Be able to cope with a wet season** – your ability to ensure you can load, dry, cure and pull down a crop when conditions in the field are wet could be the difference between a bad year and a very profitable one.
- **Size** – build the store to a size you can manage and can fill and get under control in seven to 10 days. There was a trend of building larger-than-necessary stores in the 1980s. Two 1,500t stores might be better than one 3,000t store.