News Release

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Autonomous farming moves from concept to commercial reality, says IAgrE conference

Agricultural automation has reached a tipping point, with autonomous systems now delivering measurable benefits on commercial farms and moving beyond the experimental stage, according to speakers at the Institution of Agricultural Engineers' (IAgrE) 2026 Landwards Conference.

Held at Harper Adams University, the conference, Automation in Agriculture: From Innovation to Impact, brought together engineers, researchers, technology developers and farmers to examine how autonomous technologies are being adopted across the sector.

Opening the event, IAgrE President Kit Franklin said the agricultural engineering industry has moved beyond asking whether autonomous systems can work.

"The conversation has changed dramatically over the last decade," he said. "The challenge is no longer proving autonomous systems are technically possible. The focus is now on demonstrating reliability, commercial value and real-world results for farmers."

Delegates heard examples of technologies already delivering practical benefits on farms. Dermot Tobin of PDM Produce UK reported significant reductions in labour requirements through laser-weeding technology, while William Mumford, Chief Executive of AS Communications and an AgXeed distributor, highlighted how autonomous machinery is helping to reduce fuel consumption and minimise soil impact.

Speakers also demonstrated how artificial intelligence and machine vision are enabling highly targeted weed-control systems and supporting the development of robotic solutions for labour-intensive tasks such as harvesting and crop handling.

A recurring theme throughout the conference was that successful adoption will depend not only on innovation, but also on delivering systems that are commercially viable, trusted by farmers and supported by the necessary skills and infrastructure.

Panellists also discussed the potential for automation to support the future of smaller farming businesses by helping address labour shortages, improving operational flexibility and making farming operations more sustainable and resilient.

Reflecting on the progress made within the sector, Kit Franklin said predictions made a decade ago have largely become reality.

"Ten years ago, I was regularly asked when autonomous farming would become normal," he said. "My response was that by the middle of the 2020s it would be unsurprising to see autonomous agricultural systems operating on farms. Looking at the examples shared at this conference, that point has now been reached."

He added: "The important challenge now is ensuring these technologies continue to deliver genuine value to farmers whilst helping the industry increase productivity, improve sustainability and attract the skilled people needed for the future."

ENDS

IAgrE:

IAgrE is the professional body for scientists, technologists, engineers, academics, managers and students working in the land-based sector and has an international membership base.

As a licensed body of the Engineering Council (EngC) and a founding Constituent Body of The Society for the Environment (SocEnv), IAgrE registers suitably experienced professionals as Chartered Engineer (CEng), Chartered Environmentalist (CEnv), Incorporated Engineer (IEng), Registered Environmental Practitioner (REnvP) and Engineering Technician (Eng Tech).

For further details or if you would like to interview one of the conference speakers please contact Marion King at communications@iagre.org or call 01234 750876 – mobile 07843382362