

A five-fold surge in energy prices for Norfolk's biggest maltster shocked members of Holt & District Farmers' Club.

Total energy costs for Crisp Malting Group had risen from £9m last year to £21m this year. Driven by the price of gas, it was projected to be £46m in 2023, said commercial director Bob King.

He told about 40 members at Holt Rugby Club at the autumn season's opening October meeting that the Great Ryburgh-based maltings had taken in "fantastic" quality barley from farmers across Norfolk to produce around 230,000 tonnes of malt. However, the soaring energy costs would put further pressure on malt prices, which would need to be at least £250 tonne higher.

While malt was a key ingredient, it only represented a very modest cost element in the price of a pint, said the firm's retiring commercial director.

Mr King, who judged the club's malting barley championship, said that a tonne of malt would produce roughly 15,500 pints – so the total extra cost of a pint would be about 2p.

"No doubt there will be headlines that pints will have to be 10p more because of high malt prices but actually it should only add 2p," he said in reply to a question by farmer Andrew Ross.

The surge in energy prices had already hit specialist real ale craft brewers and some had already decided to cut production or even close. However, demand remained very strong for whisky production as many leading distillers in Scotland were investing and expanding capacity. Mr King, who told members that he had overseen his last barley harvest, said even more Norfolk malt would be shipped to Scotland for whisky production.

Earlier, Chris Borrett, of independent grain merchants Adams & Howling, said that there had been a near-record entry of 50 winter and spring barley samples. It was the highest for 10 years although there had been 61 entries in 1998. He thanked John Cragg and Bill van Poortvliet for collecting the barley entries. "It was a remarkable harvest as we were handling winter barley, spring barley, oilseed rape and wheat almost at the same time," he added.

In a review of the quality Mr King said that it has been a "phenomenal" year and specific weights were also very high. The barley was exceptionally dry with moisture content of Maris Otter at 13.1pc and Flagon 12.7pc and because there were no issues with dormancy, barley was now being malted unusually earlier. Nitrogen levels were also low, he added.

He also said that some Norfolk malt would be exported to mainland Europe, including Poland, partly because of the exceptional quality. He said that Crisp Malting Group was looking to continue investing in its maltings and build on the long-standing relationship established with Norfolk farmers through the ABC supply group.

Martin Jensen, who also farms in Ukraine, gave members an update on his farming operations and thanked members for their incredible generosity in providing aid for refugees.

Members gave a painting of a Cotswold farming scene to the retiring treasurer, Tony Williams, who was standing down after 28 years' service to the club. A former NFU county chairman and a leading banker with Barclays, he has been succeeded by Laurie Hill, a newly promoted partner of chartered accounts Larking Gowen.

Barley championship

Supreme and the Charles Mott-Radclyffe Trophy – William Mack, Hempstead Hall (Craft); reserve and Hammond Trophy for spring barley, Graham Defeyter, of Edingthorpe, with Laureate.

Spring barley – 1 G Defeyter; 2 William Mack Diable; 3 Andrew Ross, Laureate.

Winter barley – 1 W Mack, Craft; 2 Harold Jones Farms, Flagon; 3 Chris Harrold, of Church Farm partners, Maris Otter.