frontier

Issue 30 | August 2024

AGRONOMY

News and agronomy advice for arable farmers

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Patrick Barker
Credit: WWF, RSPB & National Trust / Saving Our Wild Isles

Farm clusters creating sustainable supply chains

Farm clusters are a 'ground-up' approach to delivering sustainable farming practices at a landscape level. Patrick Barker from Lodge Farm in Suffolk discusses the methods adopted by the High Suffolk Farm Cluster (HSFC) which works with a range of partners, including Frontier and Kings.

"There's nothing new about farm clusters," he says.

"They were first established in 2012 on the Marlborough Downs with input from the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and there are now around 150 across the country. They bring farmers together into organised groups to achieve common goals, working at a landscape scale across farm borders."

The concept of clusters has taken off in the last few years as supply chains and investors outside the agricultural sector increasingly recognise the benefits of collaboration.

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Clusters differ from grower groups as they are established by farmers themselves. Although there are instances of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or conservation organisations creating them, experience shows they work best when they are driven from the ground up.

Patrick adds: "Without the farmers these projects never work.

"A group of us looked at some other clusters, the benefits of collaborative working and the funding and support that's available - we collectively agreed it's something we should be doing."

That led to the creation of a steering group and the formal establishment of the HSFC in 2022.

From the beginning, the aims of the cluster were open-ended with a focus on understanding the current environmental position and supporting natural progression, rather than setting out to conserve specific species or set targets.

"We just wanted to benefit farm businesses and get everyone working together," he adds.


Jim Egan

"But we needed funding and support to help make it happen. During a conversation with Jim Egan from Kings, he suggested we looked into LENs funding."

Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENs) are competitive schemes offering financial support for a range of nature-based and agricultural measures, like wildlife surveys and the adoption of regenerative practices.

With the help of Kings sustainable farming advisor, Jim Egan, HSFC was introduced to contacts at Nestlé. This led to a bid for funding being submitted to LENs for the East of England to set up the project.

"That allowed us to create a massive amount of baseline information with all the members' data feeding in," Patrick continues.

"I always stress that our target is to have sustainable farm businesses, as without that we can't deliver good things for the environment.

"As a collaborative project we are all looking at how we can be more sustainable and provide farmers with the tools they need to survive for the future because we know farming is going to be incredibly different to what it was in the past."

"Without that truly collaborative approach spanning farmers, advisors, customers and other companies, it simply wouldn't work."

The group has received input and advice from a wide range of organisations – such as Natural England, Operation Turtle Dove and the Norfolk Rivers Trust – as well as practical agronomic and conservation advice from Frontier, Kings and other companies.

Patrick adds: "Without that truly collaborative approach spanning farmers, advisors, customers and other companies, it simply wouldn't work."

Jim Egan notes that the cluster is about overall partnership working too.

"It's about the partnership of delivery. While Frontier is helping facilitate funding, which is principally coming from Nestlé through the LENs programme, we are also working with other companies.

"Across the 14 farmers in the cluster there are four different agronomy suppliers, three or four different routes to market and different seed suppliers. We are all working together to support the cluster and demonstrating that to the supply chain," he says.

The latest LENs funding has allowed the cluster to survey every hedgerow on the 5,500 hectares covered by the members, documenting the natural capital on the ground and providing information that can be used to facilitate other funding, such as actions under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI).

"This baseline will then allow us to develop natural capital in the future," Jim explains.

“The crops grown in the cluster are predominantly wheat, barley, sugar beet and oilseed rape and we need to develop sustainable products at a farm scale, irrespective of the actual supply chain or who is providing the advice and agronomy.”

Looking to the future, HSFC has put in a funding bid to help member farmers measure the natural capital they have on their farms and consider how they can manage it better.

Patrick adds: “We wouldn’t have been able to do all this without outside support and advice.

“Every time I speak to Jim or another member of the Frontier and Kings teams, it’s apparent how much they are keen to invest in this because they can see we are doing the right things for the right reasons.”

“We wouldn’t have been able to do all this without outside support and advice.”

Another benefit of the cluster approach is that it has opened up a dialogue between growers and customers.

Patrick adds: “As farmers we trade with Frontier and, historically, we wouldn’t have had direct contact with anyone further up the supply chain.

“Now we are able to talk to companies like Nestlé and PepsiCo and even the next stage of the chain.

“That means we can have discussions about what those companies want us to grow for them, and we can give them the credit for funding the cluster.”


Jasmine Utting

In terms of advice for farmers who may be considering forming a cluster, Jasmine Utting, Kings technical advisor in the east, stresses that there is no ‘one size fits all’.

She adds: “I’m involved in quite a few cluster groups and they are all led in different ways.

“HSFC works because it’s farmer-led and everyone is on the same page. Others may have a particular focus, such as a specific river catchment and are led by a particular group or a water company.

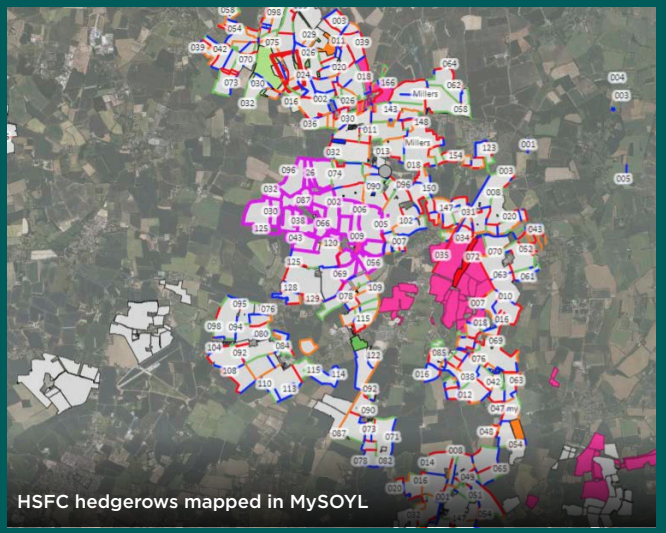
“It’s important to take time and involve everybody, bringing in those outside agencies with the appropriate knowledge and skills where necessary once the structure has been established.

“For example, the local highways department may be able to advise on roadside verges or the Wildlife Trusts can lend their knowledge about boosting specific species.

“Farmers don’t necessarily do things for money, so it is important to understand the aims and motivations, and not be too precious about any one part of the supply chain.

“It’s about working together and not competing - that’s one of the really good things about this cluster,” she says.


The HSFC visit Frontier’s Diss seed plant


HSFC hedgerows mapped in MySOYL

A mixed approach: Utilising public and private funding

With emphasis on the environment from both public and private funding, and rewards available for carbon and biodiversity improvements, growers should consider all their options according to Jim Stotzka, Frontier lead on sustainability and Hannah Clarke, SFI delivery lead and Kings technical advisor.


Hannah Clarke

"Both public and private funding have a place on farm. Information about public funding is readily available and usually well understood, but the number of private funding opportunities is increasing and can't be overlooked," explains Hannah.

Farmers should look to survey their whole farming practice and highlight where key changes can be made over the next three to five years, then apply for funding to suit their farm's needs. This could be either public or private, or a combination of both.

Private schemes sometimes involve specific crops, have different application windows and contract lengths vary, so all details need to be considered.

"There can be so many opportunities and we're supporting growers to navigate them. It's important to compare how they align with the farm's strategic goals," she says.

The driver is not just meeting environmental objectives, but also ensuring the longevity of resilient, sustainable food production and a key message is that private and public funding sources need not exclude each other.

Jim adds: "One thing to check in any private contract is how it can work alongside agri-environment schemes including the SFI or Countryside Stewardship.

"Generally, what we see is that the Government pays for practices, while private funders pay for outcomes. This means the latter often has a greater data requirement in order to understand the impact the practices have on carbon, biodiversity, soil, water and air quality."

"There are real benefits to combining both funding sources."


Jim Stotzka

He observes that most of the private funding opportunities require a carbon calculator system like the Cool Farm Tool which is relatively straightforward, covering cropping details, farming practices and fertiliser. With the recent harmonisation announcement, this should only get easier.

"However, most private funding sources are exclusive of each other and once you have committed to one you may not be able to enter another depending on the actions or fields entered," he says.

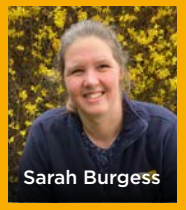
Hannah adds: "If done correctly though, there are definitely opportunities to overlap public and private funding.

"Growers should be wary of being paid twice for the same action, such as cover cropping for example, but there are real benefits to combining both funding sources."

Find help with navigating future funding at www.frontierag.co.uk/sustainable-crop-production

What emissions data means for you

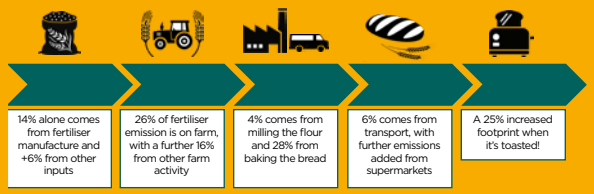
The supply chain is increasingly interested in the indirect Scope 3 emissions associated with crop production, but how this information is valued by the market is still evolving. Frontier is working with suppliers and customers to ensure good practices are rewarded.


Sarah Burgess

Sarah Burgess, Frontier sustainability manager explains: "There are environmental and climate-related requirements that large businesses in the food and drink industries need to comply with internationally, including reporting carbon emissions.

"Scope 3 emissions are those indirect supply chain emissions that a business does not have direct control over, so Frontier and its growers are being asked for a lot more information from consumer partners. This is partly because carbon is used as a proxy for wider environmental impacts."

Bread footprint



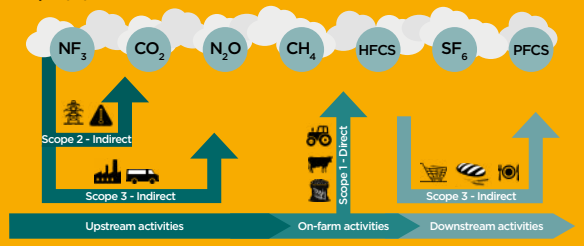
Frontier national technical sustainability specialist, Rob Nightingale, explains that the emissions associated with different parts of the overall process change in scope up the supply chain.

For example, direct emissions, referred to as Scope 1, are associated with producing a crop of wheat on farm. Indirect emissions, referred to as Scope 3, are for the company producing bread from that wheat.

He adds: "The Scope 3 boundary of the farm is different to the Scope 3 boundary for Frontier, which is different to the Scope 3 boundary of a consumer brand.

"Once the crop leaves the farm with your production information and emissions footprint, that information becomes Scope 3."

Scope 1/2/3 emissions on farm



What does this mean in practice?

Sarah adds: "Information around Scope 3 emissions is important to grain customers, and contracts are increasingly asking for data which may have varying premiums attached depending on the crop and end use.

"You therefore need to measure your baseline carbon emissions to acquire that data and then work to reduce those emissions going forward."

There is a value associated with this information, but where the payment comes from and its worth are still evolving, notes Sarah.

"Market dynamics are a big player in terms of price, but we are seeing more contracts linked to this type of data," she adds.


Rob Nightingale

Rob explains: "The real value of the data in systems such as MyFarm Analytics is in understanding your practices and adapting them to change outcomes, such as reducing on-farm emissions.

"For example, moving to low-carbon fertiliser or reducing tillage and therefore fuel use means your overall carbon footprint is lower and you are also storing more carbon in the soil.

"It's useful business information that also aids management. Having good records that you can share with the supply chain puts you in a good position going forward."

Ed Schofield

Balancing crop production with the environment

How do farmers protect and restore environmental features while maintaining food production? Frontier agronomist, Ed Schofield, shares his on-farm experience and advice.

I have a range of customers with different farming systems and I'm working with them to explore how the SFI and other schemes can be used to make better use of difficult or awkward areas of land, supporting them to adopt the actions best suited to their businesses.

I try to focus on local markets and link growers to contracts that reward sustainably produced crops too. As mentioned earlier in this issue, often this kind of funding can be layered with actions from the SFI to build long-term business resilience and profitability.

For example, some oilseed contracts now offer a premium for adopting IPM principles, direct drilling and using companion crops, providing growers with additional support and incentives to sustainably grow what can be a tricky crop.

What's important to always recognise though is that each farm has its own geography, so environmental actions need to be done with this in mind; for the right reasons, in the right way and in the right places.

On some farms there are opportunities to put several areas into SFI for example, but it's about managing the commercial land more sustainably and efficiently too and choosing options that fit with the whole farming system.

Direct drilling might be easy to adopt for some growers, but it may not make financial sense for others if they have to invest in new equipment. That being said, the various capital grants currently available could help, so it's also about linking growers to these opportunities.

A companion crop in oilseed rape

Access to the right advice and expertise is key too. SFI actions need to be implemented in the right way to avoid problems later on, such as taking appropriate steps to control black-grass and slug pressures if incorporating legume fallows. I'm also helping growers understand what sustainable practices they are already doing – sometimes without even realising it – and those which can be fairly simple to adopt. For instance, many are already companion cropping with oilseed rape and could be eligible for funding. Similarly, nutrient management plans, variable rate inputs and IPM strategies are approaches that don't always mean major changes overall, so could be good first steps for many farms.

Advice and more information can be found at www.frontierag.co.uk/sustainable-crop-production

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