

Farmer Clusters

An overview

MAY 2023 | FARMER CLUSTER GUIDELINES

WHAT IS A FARMER CLUSTER?

A 'Farmer Cluster' is a community of farmers, located in the same region, who share knowledge, support and

motivate each other to improve biodiversity and the ecological health of their farms.

This project received funding under grant agreement no. 862731.



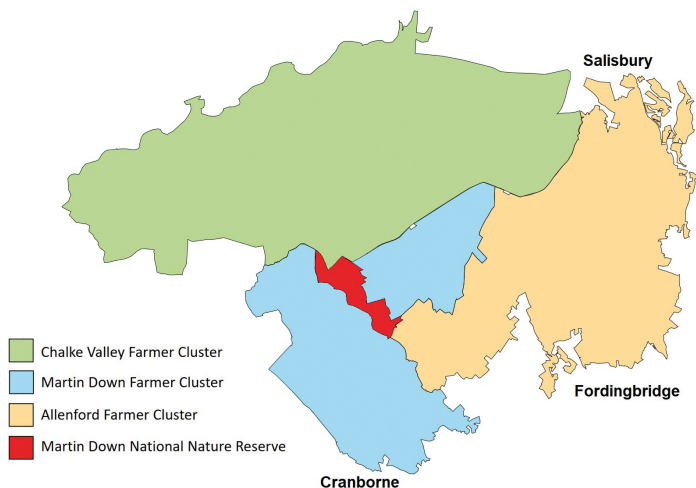
WHY DO FARMER CLUSTERS MATTER?

There is only so much that an individual farm, acting in isolation, can achieve on their own. By working together, helped by an advisor or 'facilitator', farmers can work more cohesively in their locality. This enables them to collectively deliver greater benefits for soil, water, and wildlife at a landscape scale. Farmer Clusters can bring numerous benefits to

both the local environment and communities, from improvements in habitat availability and quality across the landscape, to increasing knowledge on biodiversity and farming in the wider community. They enable farmers to share knowledge and experience which can increase innovation and accelerate positive change over larger areas.



Sharing knowledge through Farmer Clusters can deliver greater benefits for farmers and biodiversity.



HOW, WHEN AND WHERE DID FARMER CLUSTERS ORIGINATE?

In 2010 the Lawton report *Making Space for Nature* was published. This independent review was conducted to identify how the management of England's countryside could be improved to benefit biodiversity in response to increasing environmental pressures, including climate change (Lawton *et al.*, 2010). One of the key concepts presented in this report was that to create a biodiverse-rich countryside, better protection of non-designated wildlife sites was needed and that habitats needed to be 'bigger, better and joined'. This concept was tested in England between 2012 and 2015 through 12 pilot Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs), which were landscape scale initiatives that aimed to improve habitat connectivity and, in turn, biodiversity. Of the 12 NIA's, only one was farmer-led, the Marlborough Downs NIA, Wiltshire, England.

The Farmer Cluster concept grew from the development of the Marlborough Downs NIA and the Grey Partridge Recovery Project on the Peppering Estate at Arundel, Sussex, England. The latter project sparked a discussion around the ability of wildlife from 'hotspot' farms to spill over onto neighbouring farmland by improving habitat networks (Thompson *et al.*, 2015). From this discussion the idea was further

developed into the 'Farmer Cluster' concept in which a community of farmers, located in the same region, share knowledge, support and motivate each other to improve biodiversity and the ecological health of their farms. It is a bottom-up process because farmers decide on their conservation priorities and how they will be addressed, under the guidance of a facilitator. This is opposed to previously imposed top-down processes for farmland conservation in England, such as Countryside Stewardship, where environmental priorities were set by Natural England (NE), the government's adviser for the natural environment in England. The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) presented this idea to England's Department for Food, Environment and Rural affairs and NE as a concept note: 'A new approach to farmland conservation - Farmer Clusters'. Approval was granted for GWCT to pilot the Farmer Cluster approach to landscape scale conservation project between September 2013 to March 2015. During this period five NE pilot Farmer Clusters were established and a further 10 were set up with GWCT involvement (Thompson *et al.*, 2015). In 2015 Farmer Clusters facilitator funding became available to groups in England, through the NE Facilitation fund.

Of the 12 pilot Nature Improvement Areas, the Marlborough Downs in Wiltshire, England, was the only one that was farmer-led. © Peter Thompson



Farmer Clusters involve a community of local farmers who share knowledge and support each other to improve biodiversity and the ecological health of their farms. © Peter Thompson

Farmers decide on their conservation priorities such as putting in arable margins. © Peter Thompson



FARMER CLUSTERS IN ENGLAND



MORE THAN

100

CLUSTERS



COVERING

450,000

HECTARES



INVOLVING

1,700

FARMERS AND LANDOWNERS



MANY ESTABLISHED FROM

2015

WHEN FACILITATOR FUNDING BECAME AVAILABLE



FARMER CLUSTERS TODAY

The Farmer Cluster movement has expanded to include more than 100 Clusters throughout England, covering 450,000 hectares and involving 1,700 farmers and landowners since their inception in 2010 (www.farmerclusters.com). The majority of these groups were established from 2015 when facilitator funding became available to groups.

Building on this success, the FRAMEwork project (www.framework-biodiversity.eu), which began in October 2020, is extending the Farmer Cluster concept. The project aims to encourage tailored management of agrobiodiversity, incorporating local stakeholders into each Cluster to deliver the collaborative design of interventions with multiple benefits and incentive schemes, and helping farmers to monitor the effectiveness of these solutions. The resulting Advanced Farmer Cluster (AFC) approach will offer farmers:

- ✦ Autonomy to set their own objectives (problem and solution) and to respond to them with appropriate technical support and know-how;
- ✦ Encouragement to work collectively to benefit from shared experiences and to tackle biodiversity conservation at an appropriately large scale;
- ✦ An opportunity to engage with society more widely in reversing biodiversity loss and promoting

sustainability in a way that captures and values the central role to be played by farmers.

FRAMEwork is piloting the AFC concept by establishing and co-ordinating 11 pilot studies. This has included helping to establish the Cluster Stakeholder Groups, and overseeing biodiversity management activities, including implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Standardised methods have been developed for use across the pilot studies to monitor outcomes, including biodiversity, ecosystem services, farm operations and productivity.

The Clusters also operate as living-labs, providing 'real-world' platforms for landscape ecological studies to inform the development and testing of methods and tools for the management, monitoring and evaluation of biodiversity; the design of incentives to encourage biodiversity management by Farmer Clusters; and to share information and data for whole-systems assessment. Each pilot study will also be used to instigate change in the region by demonstrating best-practice and inspiring other farmers, and will be linked via an online hub to support the farmer and citizen-based collection and sharing of harmonised, high-quality information on biodiversity and farming. Together this has the potential to establish a self-sustaining and growing Advanced Farmer Cluster Network across Europe.

WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS IN A FARMER CLUSTER?

A) THE LEAD FARMER

The Lead Farmer (or Chairman) is the steering member of the Farmer Cluster. There are several characteristics that make a great Lead Farmer:

Well-connected socially or professionally in their area.

Good 'green' credentials to set an example.

Knowledgeable about environmental issues.

Able to devote a good chunk of time to the Farmer Cluster.

Able to communicate well.



B) THE FACILITATOR

The Farmer Cluster facilitator plays an essential dual role of administrating the Farmer Cluster and offering environmental advice and support to its members. They are also usually responsible for seeking funding, organising

activities and training, and co-ordinating and overseeing environmental work. Occasionally this role will be split between two people. This is perhaps more likely if your Farmer Cluster is being facilitated by an external organisation.



The facilitator deals with the administration and offering environmental advice and support.

C) VOLUNTEERS

Farmer Cluster volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds, they can include farmers, their families and the wider community from experts to novices. Regardless of their background, volunteers are

a key building block of the Farmer Cluster family, enabling data to be gathered on farmland wildlife at a much wider scale than the Farmer Cluster could achieve on its own.

Volunteers are a key building block of the Farmer Cluster enabling data to be gathered on a much larger scale.





HOW CAN I SET UP A FARMER CLUSTER?

SCENARIO 1

There are two main scenarios under which a Farmer Cluster is formed, both comprise five key steps and are outlined in the diagrams below.



STEP 1

A lead farmer decides they would like to set up and lead a Farmer Cluster in their area.



STEP 2

Lead farmer invites neighbouring farmers to join the group



STEP 3

Group uses knowledge of the local area to decide on their aims.

STEP 4

Group selects a facilitator.

STEP 5

Farmer Cluster identifies funding sources.

SCENARIO 2



STEP 1

An external organisation eg. environmental charity, university, wishes to work with farmers at a landscape scale to conserve farmland habitats/wildlife.



STEP 2

The external group identifies a lead farmer with a shared interest in their target habitat/species.



STEP 3

Lead farmer invites neighbouring farmers to join the group.

STEP 4

Group selects a facilitator or facilitator may be preselected from the external organisation.

STEP 5

Farmer Cluster with external organisation identifies funding sources.



© Helen Hoison

The Selborne Farmer Cluster selected the harvest mouse as a target species for conservation and found that they were commonplace in the Selborne area.

CASE STUDY: THE SELBORNE LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

The Selborne Landscape Partnership was founded in November 2014 and involves 11 farmers who manage a total of 4,000 hectares around the village of Selborne, Hampshire, England. Selborne was once home to Gilbert White, an 18th century naturalist, who in 1789 wrote his famous book, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. In 1767 White first described the harvest mouse as a distinct species. Because of this strong local interest, the Selborne Farmer Cluster were keen to select the harvest mouse as a target species for conservation. However, there were fears that the species was locally extinct due to the local Biodiversity Information Centre only holding one record of harvest mice in the area since 1990. Farmers and

volunteers from the partnership gathered together to search for the species and on their first search 54 harvest mouse nests were found on two farms, with every volunteer locating a nest. Later surveys across 28 separate one km² sampling sites found 472 nests, showing that, far from being extinct in the area, harvest mice seem to still be relatively commonplace in the Selborne area. Analysis of the data collected on each of these nests will allow the farmers to work together to improve the habitat further, ensuring that these small mammals continue to thrive.



A harvest mouse nest. © Peter Thompson



EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR INITIATIVES



Australia: landcareaustralia.org.au/about

France - Groupement Agricole d'Exploitation en Commun: arc2020.eu/france-collective-farming-community-and-connection

The Netherlands - Farmer Collectives: enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/w12_collective-approach_nl.pdf



USEFUL RESOURCES

- ~ farmerclusters.com
- ~ gwct.org.uk/fceurope
- ~ recodo.io



The Selborne Landscape Partnership was founded in November 2014 and involves 11 farmers who manage a total of 4,000 hectares. © Peter Thompson



FRAMEWORK



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Design and Layout: Louise Shervington
with Taskscape Associates Ltd
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