

Co-op launched to trade 'natural capital' in River Avon catchment

By Philip Clarke

A group of farmers in the River Avon catchment in Hampshire have formed a new co-operative, designed to trade in various "public goods" for their mutual benefit.

The Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) launched this week with the purpose of measuring items such as biodiversity net gain, water quality improvement and carbon capture, and selling them to companies and organisations that may need to buy these "offsets".

Initially suggested by Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) chief executive Teresa Dent in 2020, the group has attracted 80 farmer members, drawn from seven established "clusters" in the catchment, covering about 40,000ha. "This is a very inspiring development that allows the farmers to drive how they will collectively deliver the environmental goods and services that government and society wants into the future," said Ms Dent.

Conservation plan

While each cluster already delivers specific environmental benefits, such as reduced levels of nitrates in watercourses and increased numbers of farmland bird species, the EFG and GWCT are developing a conservation plan for the whole group to achieve its various environmental ambitions.

Once established, the EFG will offer the measured gains to businesses such as house-builders, which are obliged to demonstrate a 10% biodiversity net gain set against new developments, or water companies seeking to reward farmers for improving water quality.

'Natural next step'

Farmer Rob Shepherd, who chairs the new group, as well as the Allenford Farmer Cluster, based near Damerham in Hampshire, sees the EFG as the "natural next step" for the farm cluster model – developed by the GWCT, Defra and Natural England about 10 years ago.



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Better water quality is one of the natural capital assets the EFG wants to trade

"It will offer organisations looking for large-scale environmental trades the advantage of dealing with one body, rather than lots of individual farmers, and the opportunity to benefit from access to recognised scientific monitoring by the GWCT," he said.

The actual trades will be put together by the GWCT's Christopher Sparrow, who sees the sale of public goods to private sector buyers as a great way to help farmers make good the loss of Basic Payment Scheme money.

"Natural capital services offer an opportunity to deliver goods which, as farmers, we understand and can present to both the public and private sectors," he said. "Operating at scale will assist in achieving good governance, economic strength and physical efficiency."

For more information see www.environmentalfarmersgroup.co.uk

HOW THE CO-OP WILL WORK

Farmers who sign up pay a joining fee of £1.25/ha, with the proceeds used to develop the market in biodiversity gain, nitrate and phosphate reduction, and carbon offsetting. These trades will put businesses with offsetting or enhancement needs in contact with farmers who are best placed to enhance the environment they manage.

As a co-operative, the value of all the trades will be put into one pot, to be divided among all the members. Like most co-ops, EFG members will only be allowed to trade their natural capital assets through the group.

Sunflower campaign to help Ukraine farmers

Agricultural seed merchant Bright Maize and its sister company Bright Seeds are urging farmers across the UK to purchase a small quantity of sunflower seed to plant among their maize and cover crops this spring, to raise money for their Ukrainian counterparts.

For example, farmers placing orders for forage maize seed through the company could also purchase sunflower seeds (at around £30 a bag) to plant in their headlands or along roadsides.

However, the campaign is open to all farmers in the UK, not just maize growers.

The Bright Maize initiative seeks to serve as a visual reminder of suffering in Ukraine since Russian troops invaded the country. All proceeds will be distributed by the Ukrainian arm of Bright Maize parent company MAS Seeds to Ukraine's agriculture ministry, to then donate the money to farmers in areas suffering in the conflict.

Charlie Dolphin, technical advisor at Bright

Maize, said: "We were keen to show solidarity with the farmers of Ukraine, and the idea of planting sunflowers amid spring-sown crops seemed an ideal way to catch the imagination. As well as the colour resonating with the Ukrainian flag, it will be easily visible to all and show the support of UK farmers for their Ukrainian counterparts."

Farmers wishing to purchase sunflowers, which is the national flower of Ukraine, should contact Bright Maize on 01722 744494.