



PRACTICE ABSTRACT NR. 2

Working together for Agri-environmental benefits – the farmer cluster approach

Since 2012, the concept of farmers working together at a landscape scale to deliver biodiversity and improve their local environment has gained momentum. The concept now known as the Farmer Cluster was devised in the UK in response to Sir John Lawton's 2011 report '[Making Space for Nature](#)' which called for nature conservation on farmland to be bigger, better and more joined up. [The Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust](#) (GWTC) piloted the concept of farmer clusters in association with Natural England (the nature conservation authority in England). The majority of the farmer clusters have benefitted from EU funding or funding from the [Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund](#) (CSFF) while some have chosen to self-fund their work. The farmer cluster is characterised as a farmer-led and outcome-orientated approach. The starting point is the question "What wildlife do you want on your farm?" Five common implementation steps can be identified: 1) Identifying a prospective Lead Farmer, who invites neighbours to join; select an advisor. 2) Mapping farms, collating information on their habitats/species. 3) Agreeing focal species and habitat management, devising education elements, creating local partnerships. 4) Monitoring through follow-up surveys, feedback, rapport and team building within the Cluster. 5) Encouraging other farmers to engage in conservation by setting an example. In 2018, work is underway to investigate how well the approach works across England. Similar collaborative initiatives exist across the UK, including Nature Improvement Areas, Cotswold Water Park WILD Project, and the Pontbren Project. (More info: katrin.prager@abdn.ac.uk)

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Farmer clusters and farmer groups that received funding under the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund are often discussed as synonym. In fact, www.farmerclusters.com lists all Facilitation fund groups. However, the ideal of the genuinely farmer-led group may only apply to a handful of groups; they tend to fund their facilitator through members contributing £1 per hectare of land owned. Because groups reflect the diverse interests and farming enterprises of their members, each group is unique and operates their own governance model. Some have a steering group or board, or a chairperson. Group vary with regard to the level of influence that the facilitator, their organisation and other farming and conservation organisations have. Trade-offs are increasingly recognised: What a farmer group may choose as their priority actions may not necessarily align with priorities under the agri-environment scheme; hence there is an inherent trade off between 'farmer-led' and 'landscape-scale' ambitions. While 'gelling' of group members is conducive to agreeing and undertaking joint action, such a group may become a 'closed shop' and unwilling to accept new members, thus undermining the idea of reaching more farmers and engaging with communities.



ABOUT AGRILINK

AgriLink is a multi-actor project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. It brings together 16 partners from 13 countries, including universities, applied research institutes, advisors and consultants from public organisations, private SMEs, a farmer-based organisation and specialists in communication and distance learning.

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