RNAA Norfolk Farming Systems Round Table 2

ENVIRONMENTAL SCHEMES: ARE THEY WORKING FOR US?

Meeting of Norfolk farmers, processors and food and crop researchers

Hosted by Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association at the Royal Norfolk Showground.

Thursday 1 May 2025

Chair: Emily Norton, Trustee of RNAA

Summary

The group discussed **environmental requirements** within the supply chain, looking at data collection and monitoring. They noted a huge range of current approaches to carbon measurement and the need for an approach with accepted standardisation to generate trust and stability across the market. They considered the possibility of generating a low-cost, farmer-generated, independent monitoring system for sustainable or regenerative agriculture practices.

This led into a related discussion around **collaboration** across the food supply chain and the generally-felt need that better collaboration would benefit Norfolk's food industry. Some gave examples of successful collaboration between producers and food processing industry, or of excellent collaboration between farmers in other countries in order to access government investment; others revealed that past inter-family conflicts of farming neighbours can impede efforts. People said collaboration efforts must be designed to clearly defined needs, messaged supported effectively and allocated time and resource to put into effect.

1. Environmental requirements within the food supply chain

Discussion was framed around clarifying sustainable and regenerative agriculture practices for farmers. How might farmers and food processors and retailers be able to capture actions relating to these practices? The aim is to develop a tool for meeting requirements (e.g. carbon emissions targets/ natural capital based measurements) and for narratives to encourage wider market uptake.

Land management for environmental sustainability involves very complex discussions and decisions around land sharing/sparing, rotations, areas under cropping and potential land use diversification opportunities including solar power.

1.1 Data collection and monitoring around science-based targets

The group discussed several areas of environmental targets for sustainability:

- **Carbon emissions/footprint:**
  - Emissions focus was Scope 1 and 2 (direct emissions) originally for most businesses; has now moved to Scope 3 (indirect emissions from elsewhere in supply chain e.g. soya)
  - We need to know how to support and reward better carbon credentials
  - Around 5-10% arable farms have probably produced a carbon footprint analysis, but with many variations on the theme (see 1.2)
- Other environmental targets include plastics reduction
- Biodiversity isn't measured in targets (hence wildlife cluster in Breckland pilot)

- Terra Nostra is an example from Poland of a group that describes and certifies Regenerative Agriculture. This is verified at producer level by the producer (farmer self-assessment), with soil laboratory tests backing up reporting.

1.2 Data and data use

- **There are many measurement schemes, and competition for various schemes for carbon.** At the most basic level there is variation even around the most basic measurement approach to measure carbon intensity on-farm (ie. emissions by unit area or by unit production). One attendee commented that using 'emissions by unit production' is essential as this demonstrates improvements and differentiation / improvement against other production methods.
- Without regulation or standardisation, and with more than 60 carbon calculators available, **suppliers can use whichever provides best numbers for the situation**. For example, if a supplier needs to demonstrate 10% reduction in carbon emissions per year, they might choose a method generating a high initial calculation, knowing they have met/can easily meet this requirement (through e.g. nitrogen fertiliser reduction, reduced use of fossil fuel vehicles)
- Several organisations would like to have claims for Regenerative Agriculture but need certification and a whole farm system measurement to a globally recognised standard for this to be meaningful. They need a simple system that gives farmers value and is useable across the rotation.
- Some note increased unwillingness/inability to share data despite there being more data generated by improvements in precision agriculture techniques and on-farm monitoring equipment. Information belongs to the companies, so it is tricky to access for research/reporting.
- Several agreed that that the lack of standardisation on measurement of elements of a sustainable supply chain provides an opportunity for this group to come up with the answer and roadmap for this. This needs to be done under British Standards conforming to International Standards. Can we make a brand using this independent measurement approach (UEA/NRP/others)?
- At the same time, one attendee cautioned that must find a way retain the qualitative complexity and added value of the farms' changes, decisions, processes and journey and not have all reduced to complete standardisation.
- Data produced collaboratively can be very useful – e.g. Catalyst data (Holkham/Salle group); they are doing applied research with UEA/Norwich Research Park
- The quality and amount of research data varies between crops – for sugar BBRO are good; for vegetables there is much less research available.
- Whose emissions are they? One attendee questioned this – a farmer might be told to include fertiliser related emissions in their Scope 3 if they use a product, but are manufacturers of the product exempt from this responsibility of assuming the emissions?

1.3 Possibility for Nature Recovery Projects as evidence baseline

- **Four nature recovery projects run by professional farmers in Norfolk are creating baselines of evidence** (all differently/independently). If we could group and standardise this data, this would cover 15-25% Norfolk's land area.
- Can we bring this together – "**what does 'Good' look like and how do we measure it?**". An independent organisation could potentially articulate what regenerative Landscape Recovery looks like. Landscape Recovery could then be measured over time from baseline and improvement; and the benefits can be marketed to the retailers/consumers. It could be a 'natural capital balance', where farms make choices about what they do on their farm, with implications for the annual marketable natural capital. However, it is challenging to do this in practice.
- **A whole farm approach is needed** for the delivery of Landscape Change. However, many properties are tenanted or are leased for specific rotations. Some attendees consider that this makes **crop-based reporting difficult** because most institutional landlords / land agents may not e not interested in following more sustainable practices, considering cover crops to be too costly to include in the rotation.
- **The financial benefit has to be demonstrated**; it must be driven from the producing end and involve the whole rotation.

1.4 End purchaser and/or finance needs dictate efforts

- **Retailers** want sustainability in supply chain but are unsure what it means exactly.
- Narrative of provenance is very important for retailers but not for wholesalers. The (personalisation of the story of produce adds value for retailers (but increasingly they want low cost AND a narrative). For **wholesalers price is most important** and only lip service is paid to other aspects (narrative, environmental sustainability).
- One farmer (in peat area) was told they must reduce Scope 3 emissions by 2027 or will be cut off from their supplier.
- **Sometimes pressure from public directly dictates** producers' focus e.g. soya for poultry feed. One producer said they could potentially offset soya feeds with more sustainable production of other cereals, given a trustworthy calculation system; this could be a good narrative.
- **Banks and financers may influence environmental actions** may have requirements to reduce carbon emissions, or may have improved lending rates for green finance, for example.
- One attendee mooted Why don't producers push back to retailers and wholesalers and saying 'this is what we have to offer'?

This is an opportunity for our group to come up with the answer and roadmap for this – we have four nature recovery projects amongst professional farming in Norfolk doing baselining. We could potentially group data and cover 15-25% Norfolk's landmass

Most appeared to agree on the idea of the Natural Capital measurement approach, and the idea of the experiences of the Landscape Recovery pilots being used to create a system for this.

2. Collaboration between farmers and across the supply chain on environmental schemes

- One of the biggest blocks to local farmer collaboration is unresolved inter-family/personal conflict and difficulties. Some efforts towards farmer cooperatives failed when some were seen to be benefitting more than others. These organisations must be run professionally in order to work.
- Scale and need is an important consideration: landscape scale work encourages collaboration, whereas Biodiversity Net Gain (on farm) doesn't need it.
- Some producers have direct connections with merchants, which can be very helpful.
- **Should this involve public money?** Some attendees are feeling very uncomfortable with the current offer from DEFRA. Several said it is better not to involve public/government money (DEFRA) because there is too much uncertainty. People are asked to 'sign land over for 20 years', but claim that DEFRA is able to pull funding within 12 months. This approach feels too risky for farmers.
- **Farmers want to retail control over natural capital measurement/ data**: Several said that farmers must find the money for this approach to measurement of natural capital within themselves for commercial business and retail; in order to retain control over the process. One referred to the 'debacle' of the Greener Farms Commitment (known informally as Green Tractor – not to be confused with the Green Tractor Scheme that monitors agricultural plastic waste reduction). [This was an optional standard developed under the Red Tractor UK assurance scheme led by retail requests but was not developed with farmer support, met significant farmer backlash and concern about extraction of farm data for retailers' benefit and potential for forced farmer compliance. It was axed in 2024 before launch].
- In this scenario, food production can be the bottom line, measured in pounds/tonne and tonne/ha. Attendees want ponds/food production as the focus in nature-based landscape schemes, not cycle paths.

Required scheme components:

- Staff to run it
- Demonstrators showing changes in cultivation
- Independence
- Natural capital markets information
- Mandatory compliance
- Simple, clear marketable messaging
- Baseline
- Validation of tools
- We (farmers here) need to drive this; BBRO and others can do the work on it.

3. Next steps

- In November 2025, Local Nature Recovery Strategy Round 2 projects will generate summaries of progress to date – we could create financing models needed for collaboration
- Investigate regenerative agriculture certification
- Research supply chain predictions for the next 10 years

- Consider if we should convene the processors before we develop this system in order to ask what they are looking for?

Further information:

1. DEFRA-funded Local Landscape Recovery Strategies in Norfolk:
   - North Norfolk: Wilder, wetter, better for nature - Round 1 - 5000 ha Holkham Estate, 67 land managers
   - Wendling Beck - 2000 acre nature recovery project – Round 1
   - Breckland Farmers Wildlife Network - Round 1
   - West Norfolk Nature Network (WNNN) – Round 2 - 16 farms
   - North-West Norfolk Coast Project – Round 2 – 5000 ha incl Sandringham/Wild Ken Hill

2. Terra Nostra – Agricultural Development Foundation – Regenerative Agriculture certification (Poland) –

3. Norfolk Local Nature Recovery Strategy public consultation

   Underway until 11 June 2025

Attendees:

Andrew Blenkiron – Elveden Estate agriculture director – ecosystems services, renewable energy
Andrew Lovett – School of Environmental Sciences, UEA
Andrew Peel – Salle Farms Estate Manager
Andrew Spinks – RNAA Council/Brown & Co
Chris Borrett – Adams & Howling
Chris Graf Grote – farmer/Nuffield International
Clarke Willis – Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Anglia Farmers
Dan Green – Agricultural Director, British Sugar
David Marsham – Gayton Estate, lead West Norfolk Landscape Recovery Project
Denis Lima e Alves – Norwich Business School, UEA, sustainability accounting
Ellie Woods – Crisp Malt Sustainability Manager
Frances Roberson – Food and Farm Discovery Trust
Gavin Lane – farmer, Tittleshall (arable/sustainable farming)/CLA Country Land and Business Association, Wash Landscape Partnership
Jamie Lockhart – Frederick Hiam Foods (farming/fresh produce), Breckden farm network landscape recovery pilot
Mark Gorton – Traditional Norfolk Poultry – free range poultry to supermarkets
Tom Brown – CEO Sotterley Estate (regen arable and mixed woodland) (Hodmedod's)

Organising team:

Emily Norton – RNAA trustee/Owner and founder at Farm Foresight Ltd (Chair)
Poul Hovesen – President, RNAA, retired farmer
Mark Nicholas – Managing Director, RNAA
Bob King – 35 years multi-industry and working with RNAA
Natasha Grist – Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development, Norwich Research Park

Many thanks to all attendees, and to organising team for comments on initial drafts.
Comments and corrections by 31 May 2025 to Lead Author Natasha Grist – n.grist@uea.ac.uk.

Background note:
These meetings are part of a wider initiative of Sustainable Farming Systems for Norfolk. Two closed roundtables were convened in April and May 2025 generating discussion and valuable opinions about current status of Norfolk's food sector in advance of the Big Debate, to be held at the Royal Norfolk Show in June 2025. Contact Mark Nicholas at the RNAA or Natasha Grist at NISD for further information.