

**Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP)**  
*Meeting Summary*

Introduction

On 22nd February 2023, the Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) hosted the first **Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP)** of the year. The meeting was attended by representatives of 7 of the 11 members of the Platform: Tesco, Sainsbury's, Kellogg's, Nomad Foods, PepsiCo, G's Fresh, and Yeo Valley. Guest organisations including Red Tractor, LEAF, NIAB, WWF and M&S were also present.

The following is a summary, under Chatham House rules, of the discussions and decisions made during the meeting, organised according to the three key SHIP components, **Public Commitment**, **Knowledge Exchange**, and **Categories/Projects**.

- 1. Public Commitment:** *How can the Supply Chain demonstrate collective/measurable commitment to delivering soil health*

SHIP Commitment and Categories

The draft SHIP commitment and six categories for action drafted in 2022 and consulted on was discussed. There was universal agreement that this was the right approach for the SHIP to take, and that the six categories will set the agenda for the year ahead. It was also confirmed that the menu of actions were examples of best practices businesses can undertake in pursuit of the wider SHIP commitment – i.e. to be used as guidance - businesses are not expected to undertake all of these.

**SHIP Commitment and Categories**

*“By participating in the Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP) we commit to knowledge exchange, identification and sharing of best practice and the adoption of proportionate and impactful actions that will contribute to the goal of sustainably managed soils in the UK by 2030”.*

**1. Consistent Metrics**

A consistent set of farm soil metrics is established and communicated throughout the industry, providing clarity and consistency to all farmers

**2. Risk reduction**

Critical soil risks specific to individual crops, geographies and climates are identified and mitigation efforts introduced

**3. Communications**

Soil becomes a pillar of customer, investor and stakeholder communications - alongside air, water and biodiversity



**6. Net Zero**

Farming's ability to capture and store carbon in the soil is understood, measured, promoted and rewarded

**5. Financial Support**

Farmers are rewarded and compensated for management changes that improve or protect the soil

**4. Knowledge Exchange**

Best soil management practices and techniques are identified and shared throughout the industry

## 2022 Reporting

It was previously agreed that the SSA would report on SHIP annually to measure progress against the six categories over time and inform the Platform's future developments. The draft 2022 report was sent to all members ahead of the meeting, including:

- A summary of all new and on-going business initiatives under the six categories (p.8-9 of the report). This list of 30+ business initiatives is evidence of progress and investment against all six categories in 2022.
- An analysis of these initiatives, which indicated slow, incremental momentum in the pursuit of soil health. Corporate initiatives are piecemeal, targeted (individual crops and grower groups), unilateral and often show 'businesses as usual'. This fragmentation echoes what is happening with soil at a government level.
- Other critical drivers of soil health management identified by businesses and the SSA include: the war in Ukraine impacting farmer costs and incomes, UK summer droughts shining a light on the vulnerability of the UK farming system to climate change, UK river pollution caused by farming gaining political, media and public attention.
- **The SSA presented the following recommendations for SHIP action in 2023, explaining that they have varying degrees of ambition, detail and the need for input from members (some are focused on work and research being carried out by the SSA).**

## Recommendations for 2023

Please refer to p. 6-7 in the draft 2022 Report for more detail.



### **a) Consistent Metrics:**

*Establish the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard as a universal tool for on-farm soil health measurement and benchmarking, applicable for numerous purposes throughout the supply chain.*



### **c) Communications:**

*Exploit available channels to communicate about the importance of soil health to customers and public, including awareness weeks, labelling and certification schemes.*



### **e) Financial Support:**

*Better understand the different economic drivers (ecosystem services) and identify opportunities to involve and engage supply chains.*



### **b) Soil risk reduction and mitigation:**

*Identify and highlight crop and context-specific soil risks and their causes for dissemination to internal (corporate and sourcing) audiences and other supply chain stakeholders.*



### **d) Knowledge Exchange:**

*Identify appropriate mechanisms for knowledge and guidance dissemination to signpost to farmers research and best practice.*



### **f) Carbon/Net Zero:**

*Better understand how soil carbon can and should be included in Scope 3 Reporting, inform and educate supply chain and internal audiences of business plans and expectations.*

The following was raised and discussed in relation to the recommendations:

- There was consensus amongst all present that these priorities and recommendations are the right ones to make best use of the Platform in 2023.
- Many voiced their agreement with the need to separate soil health and Net Zero concerns as soil health needs to be prioritised in of itself.
- Some were also interested in doing more in the realm of government advocacy. This is an area the SSA is very active in and it was agreed that the SHIP 2022 report can help draft a clear message around what industry needs to drive soil health ahead of the upcoming General Election - this can be discussed at a later SHIP meeting. This will also be an opportunity to show the work the supply chain is doing. Businesses were encouraged to discuss this with their government affairs teams.
- There was also a desire to get further insights into the research happening at an academic institution level - understanding who is working on what, identify gaps and what businesses can help support.

- This was also a vacuum identified by the [ELMs-Exchange](#) project the SSA was involved in with the University of Plymouth - which seeks to kick-start collaborative, cross-sector research and innovation initiatives, specifically designed to help farmers and Defra evaluate how SFI will deliver for the environment, farm productivity and food security. Businesses are encouraged to get in touch with the SSA if they wish to look for academic partners.

#### *Next Steps*

- **All members were asked to give feedback on the 2022 Report prior the 22nd March. After this point the Report will be finalised and published on the SSA website.**
- 2. **Knowledge Exchange:** *An overview of relevant soil initiatives*

An overview of the relevant soil related policies and initiatives that have taken place since the start of the year was given. Please refer to the briefing note disseminated in advance of the meeting for further details on these developments.

- 3. **Specific Categories:** *How can the Supply Chain contribute to the improvement of soil health*

#### Consistent Metrics

A priority recommendation in 2023 will be to establish the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard as a universal tool for on-farm soil health measurement and benchmarking. The Scorecard has been tested by some SHIP members and their supplying farmers/growers and is regarded as the right step to pursue the aim of the first SHIP category (Consistent Metrics): *to have a consistent set of farm soil metrics established and communicated throughout the industry, to provide clarity and consistency to all farmers.*

The ambition is to make a collaborative announcement that recognises the potential to use the Scorecard - accompanied with a workshop and potential media coverage. Prior to this however, clarity around government schemes is needed to ensure SHIP actions align and support government ambition - the SSA will keep members informed of future developments expected in 2023.

In the meantime, a critical driver of establishing the Scorecard throughout the supply chain will be certification schemes with direct contacts with farmers. The SSA mapped out how existing certification schemes (LEAF and the draft Red Tractor Greener Farms Commitment) and Defra's Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme compare to one another. There are already clear overlaps where alignment is possible - largely around Soil Organic Matter (SOM), Soil Management Plan (SMP) requirements and timeframes for soil testing. The Scorecard appears to be compatible with all three schemes and can provide consistency around testing methodologies and interpreting results.

## Certification and government schemes

	 Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs	 LEAF Marque Standards (April 2023)	 DRAFT Green Farms Commitment (TBC)
<b>Farm Type</b>	Arable and Hort + Improved Grassland	Arable and Hort + Livestock	All (excl. Indoor livestock)
<b>Soil Metrics Required</b>	SOM	SOM + minimum of one other (VSA, earthworms or other)	AHDB Scorecard: SOM, NPK, pH, earthworms, VESS
<b>Frequency of Soil Testing</b>	Every 5 yrs	Any justified	Every 5 yrs min
<b>Practices Required</b>	SMP, enhancing SOM, Winter Crop	SMP, Integrated NMP, risks to soil considered, maintaining SOM & SOC	SMP, NMP, risks to soil considered
<b>Methodologies &amp; Guidance</b>	Defra guidance (assessing risks, SMP, SOM methodology & practices)	LEAF guidance (soil testing)	AHDB Scorecard (methodologies and benchmarks for soil tests)

Those present heard from guest speakers from LEAF and Red Tractor to get an update on where soil metrics and measurements currently sit within the schemes.

### LEAF Marque Standard

- LEAF Marque is an independent certification scheme underpinned by the principles of integrated farm management, seeking to encourage farmers to have a continuous improvement mindset.
- LEAF operates at a global level (currently in 19 countries but this will increase to around 50 in the next two years). This means standards need to be globally applicable (both in terms of their language and their asks of farmers and growers).
- Soil health is an intended outcome of the scheme and there are also networks of LEAF demonstration farms and innovation centres looking at soil health best practices.
- There is a Soil Management section in the LEAF Marque Standard. Version 16 is coming into effect on the 1st April 2023 and will now require farmers to test their soils (an essential control point) for SOM and metrics of choice.
- LEAF has also produced guidance on measuring and monitoring soil health and offers an optional template for a SMP.
- The Sustainable Farming Review is a requirement for all farms under LEAF Marque. This includes questions to help guide and identify areas of intervention and measure progress. The Review signposts a range of guidance including AHDB GREATsoils work. This is also where the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard can be signposted. Due to LEAF's global nature the Scorecard (only applicable to a UK context) cannot be embedded within standards.

### Red Tractor Greener Farm Commitment

- Red Tractor has been working on a Greener Farm Commitment - a module that will sit across the Red Tractor core standards just like current free range and enhanced welfare modules.
- Red Tractor was set up with a focus on food safety and more recently animal welfare - it has 46 thousand members within core standards, and a couple 100 in the free range and welfare modules. Recent consultations with members aimed at understanding how to make core standards more environmentally focussed has led to the development of this draft module.
- The module covers five elements: Carbon Footprint, Soil Management, Nutrient Management, Waste and Biodiversity. This is currently in development (research and piloting) along with supporting IT systems.

- The Soil Management element requires soil measuring and monitoring using the AHDB Scorecard as the required protocol to follow.
- A SMP will also be required. This is already required under the Horticulture and Arable core standards but not in all. How soil is covered in the core standards will require future work (core standards are not due an update until 18 months time) but this module is a good starting point.

#### Q&A

- Concerns were raised about the fact that whilst the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard is practical and useful for some farmers, it only focuses on a few well-established metrics and does not allow for an in-depth understanding of soil biology which is required to successfully transition to regenerative farming. Some businesses wish to inspire farmers to go further than the core metrics of the Scorecard.
  - Whilst this is a valid concern, it was explained that the Scorecard is the equivalent of a “GP soil health check up” - these are core metrics that are agreed on by the soil community as being the basic indicators of soil health. They allow farmers to get the very basics of soil health right and be directed towards next steps according to where they fall within the benchmarks.
  - These core metrics are also cost effective and practical, allowing farmers to put them into practice easily and track the impacts of certain farming practices on soil health.
  - Farmers can indeed be directed to further metrics appropriate to specific crops and localities - however these core metrics should not be overlooked as this could lead to aspects of soil health being neglected.
  - It was also noted that the Soil Biology and Soil Health Programme, within which sits the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard, evaluated newer biological metrics - this is yet to be released but publications on this are expected in 2023. It found that these newer metrics are expensive and cannot yet be benchmarked - making them harder to implement and interpret results. However, this can be explored further with farmers who are more advanced in soil health measuring and monitoring.
- Initial feedback from Greener Farms Commitment pilots (with livestock farmers) found that the Soil Management section is one of the ones with the biggest farmer knowledge gap. Soil Management Plans (as well as Biodiversity Management Plans) will be new to many farmers. So there is a need for guidance and signposting.
  - SMPs are also required under Defra’s SFI (and previous Environmental Stewardship schemes) so it is good to see them being embedded in certification schemes.
  - Work could also be undertaken to digitise SMPs and make it easier for farmers to upload their data onto them - such work would require funding.
  - The AHDB Scorecard can be used in each zone identified in the SMP. This can help tie the SMP with a farmer’s risk assessment and understand which actions are required.
- Whilst the Scorecard is not applicable for lowland peat - the SSA is liaising with the Defra Lowland Peat Taskforce to ensure SHIP aligns and supports their work.
- Some members were interested in understanding how the data being collected via certification schemes can be aggregated and aligned with requirements of the WWF Basket reporting some businesses are signed up to. This requires further discussions.

#### Carbon / Net Zero

This will be another priority project for SHIP in 2023. Businesses are at different stages of understanding where soil carbon should sit within their Scope 3 emissions. WRAP and the UK government will be looking at this issue in 2023 and nature-based solutions and offsets have recently faced accusations of greenwashing. This creates a need and opportunity for SHIP to

understand these issues and drivers (via SSA research) and establish what it means for members. On that basis, SHIP can come up with recommendations and messages to farmers in their supply chains.

This project area will be the focus area of the next SHIP meeting in April/May. A briefing note explaining some of the expectations for soil carbon insetting and offsetting and other complications and opportunities will be circulated to members before the meeting. Experts from the UK Farm Soil Carbon Code Consortium and the NFU will be invited. Some areas to discuss are as follows:

- How is SOM/SOC reflected in 'official' guidance such as WRAP/GHG/SBTI/FLAG etc. government policy?
- What standards will insets operate to? Will this be the same ones as for offsets (e.g. MRV)?
- What are the costs of SOM/SC measurement?
- What message can/should Food and Drink businesses send to farmers? What feedback are SHIP members getting?
- Is there merit in a joined-up position to go out to farmers?

#### *Discussion*

- The WWF-Tesco partnership is also looking at the governance and frameworks around carbon insetting (not soil specific) which can be used to inform this SHIP project area.
- Yeo Valley has recently concluded a pilot project on the new WRI standard on land removals. A guidance document is expected to be published in the Autumn highlighting the need to demonstrate statistical significance and show representative data.
- Some present wish to get a clearer understanding of how modelling for soil carbon sequestration can help understand if businesses are on the right Net Zero pathways.

#### *Next Steps*

- **Members were asked to inform the SSA of any areas on soil carbon they would like covered at the next SHIP meeting and/or experts they would like to invite.**

#### Risk Mitigation and Reduction

A brief update on this project was provided, including the continuation of the soil risk mapping research. This work now includes the identification of the risks to soil according to different farm types, the farming practices causing them and actions needed to mitigate them.

Next steps will be to get a better understanding of how these "on the ground" practices are being impacted and influenced by the sourcing practices of businesses buying from these farmers. The SSA will be sending this work to NFU selected levy boards and trade associations for their input, and will report back on this work at either the spring or summer SHIP meeting.

Following conversations with the Environment Agency and the NFU, a useful final outcome for this research would be to turn it into educational material to inform sourcing managers and teams within businesses - as there seems to be no awareness of how sourcing practices and specifications will impact decision making on a farm and ultimately lead to risks to soil health.

#### *Next steps*

- **Members are encouraged to flag any contacts they think the SSA should engage with about this work.**
- **Members can start giving some thought to what would be the most effective format to package this work to inform sourcing teams e.g. videos, graphics, booklets etc.**

## Communications, Knowledge Exchange, Financial Support

*Communications:* Feedback from many businesses last year was that there was an untapped opportunity when it came to using internal business PR and comms teams to communicate the importance of soil health to a wider public. A [UK Soil Awareness Week](#) was piloted by the SSA and the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (UKCEH) last year which could be used as a galvanising time in the autumn to put soils on the UK agenda.

*Knowledge Exchange:* This will largely consist of a research exercise for SSA as this relates to a much broader challenge in farming - the application of science and research and making it relatable to on farm practice beyond soil health. An example of this is the specific need to look at practices that sequester carbon in soil, as the current evidence and understanding of these is thin and holding back a wider understanding of the amount of carbon that can be sequestered to inform accurate modelling. This can be discussed at the next SHIP meeting focusing on Carbon / Net Zero.

*Financial Support:* The action for this category is based on feedback from members last year and will be SSA research focused. The goal will be for businesses to get a better understanding of what kind of financial support is available for supplying farmers to support ecosystem services in order for businesses to understand how they can help advise farmers to identify these sources in the future. The SSA will be carrying research into these different income streams (both public and private) and report back to SHIP members.

### *Next steps*

- **Members were encouraged to put the SSA in touch with PR and comms teams interested in this.**

### **Actions for SHIP Members & SSA**

	<b>SHIP Members</b>	<b>SSA</b>
<i>2022 Report</i>	Feedback on 2022 Report and 2023 Recommendations by the 22nd March.	Finalise and publish.
<i>Carbon / Net Zero</i>	Provide Qs to discuss at April/May meeting and who (external speakers) you would like to hear from & invite Net Zero colleagues.	Plan next SHIP meeting on Carbon / Net Zero including briefing note & follow up on WWF-Tesco Partnership on relevant research.
<i>Consistent Metrics</i>	-	Liaise with Defra on policy developments for soil health monitoring and measuring.
<i>Soil Risk and Mitigation</i>	Share relevant internal/external contacts with SSA & discuss with internal sourcing teams best 'format' for sharing information.	Send research to levy boards and trade associations for input.
<i>Communications</i>	Introduce SSA to PR teams.	Explore opportunities to work with business PR and comms teams.
<i>Knowledge Exchange</i>	-	Liaise with ELMs-Exchange contacts and explore potential mapping of soil health research.
<i>Financial Support</i>	-	Keep watching brief on different farmer income streams available for ecosystem services.
<i>Other</i>	-	Explore potential for government advocacy via SHIP.