

Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP)
November Meeting Summary

Introduction

On 1st November 2023, the Sustainable Soils Alliance (SSA) hosted the 4th **Soil Health Industry Platform (SHIP)** of the year. The meeting was attended by representatives of 9 of the 11 members of the Platform: Arla, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Nomad Foods, Morrisons, G's Fresh, Waitrose, and Yeo Valley. Guest organisations including the Environment Agency, WWF, NFU, McCain and Land App were also present.

The meeting provided updates on projects relevant to the six categories for action that underpin the SHIP commitment. The following is a summary, under Chatham House rules, of the discussions and decisions made during the meeting.

1. Risk Reduction

Environment Agency (EA) engagement with the agri-food industry

Overview of the Environment Agency's National Agriculture team:

- The EA consists of several teams, including one working with Defra to advise and support on the new environment land management schemes, another looking at different ways to regulate industry as well as teams engaging with farm assurance schemes, retailers and processors. The EA also has different soil experts throughout its teams.
- The EA advises Defra on how to deliver the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) targets, including a soil target of sustainably managing 60% of agricultural soils by 2030 and are working on baselining soil data and supporting Defra with its Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment (NCEA) that's been carried out across the country, led by Natural England.
- EA teams also visit farms to understand best practices, such as Yeo Valley and Wyke farms.
- The national team covers England, and there are 14 regional teams in the EA with different agricultural inspection offices, who have been targeting farms over the past 18 months, having done around 4200 inspections.
- There is also work underway to ensure EA agriculture officers have the knowledge and confidence to enforce some of the regulations that relate to soils including training on the farming rules for water and soil management. Whilst most of the regulations are more focused on other environmental themes and water quality, soils feature in those.
 - Defra has commissioned the EA to conduct an internal review of the regulations, to see if they are fit for purpose following the EU exit.
 - Changes in government over the next year may change the national approach to regulations so increasing communications and awareness of these will be important.
- One of the major things the EA is looking to do is raise the profile and the importance of soil across the Environment Agency but also with their partners - hence their involvement with the SHIP.
 - There are lots of experts at the Environment Agency which can help SHIP members. Businesses are encouraged to get in touch if they are facing any challenges internally or externally and are in need of expert advice.

- EA directors are also keen to talk at any meetings or events across the supply chain, and find ways to collaborate and potentially see what research the EA could commission to help businesses.

Agri-Food Industry Sharepoint:

- The EA have put together a SharePoint to collate and share all the different types of information and advice available across gov.uk and others such as the AHDB that will hopefully be of use to the agri-food supply chain. The EA is keen to ensure the material on it is of use to industry.
 - Participants were invited to share their email addresses to access and use this information internally or externally to help engage different audiences.
- Example of resources it contains:
 - A dedicated soil management folder which includes a 'key messages' document specifically for soils, looking at the different challenges, solutions and benefits to deliver good and healthy soils. This document can be used internally or externally to increase the confidence of board members and investors that can help with the decision making.
 - The Defra Farming Blog which businesses can sign up to and receive updates on different policies, grants and funding, i.e. the latest on the slurry infrastructure grant.
 - Articles on farming advice which turn technical information into simple communications materials, useful for audiences that are less technical.
 - A file dedicated to regulations for agriculture and what they are. i.e. SAFFO regulations fact sheet with tangible actions people can take to make sure they comply. The EA also has a news bulletin that comes out every few months.
 - Videos and podcasts which offer overviews on various soil health issues such as soil erosion. These can be shared with farmers and others across the supply chain.
 - A couple of case studies on farm plastics, with farms in Devon and Cornwall. This helps peer to peer learning for farmers. The EA is keen to work with businesses to add case studies that they would like to have. Following conversations with Yeo Valley they will be writing one on homegrown feed.

Discussion Q&A

- Businesses were encouraged to get in touch with the EA to get access to the Sharepoint and provide feedback on the following:
 - What do businesses need from the EA?
 - How can the EA add value to help engage suppliers or internal teams?
 - Is information on the SharePoint useful and what could be added?
 - Would businesses like access to EA technical experts?
- The use of a Sharepoint was opted for rather than a website as it is very difficult to publish things on the gov.uk website. Current guidelines mean that no images or specific formats can be used. This is also a quicker way to assemble relevant information.
- Businesses agreed that at first glance the SharePoint seemed to be really useful and are keen to engage with EA teams and experts.
- Discussing future trials with the EA that would be useful for growers was raised as an area of interest.
- As was discussing ways to offer farmers targeted material based on the issues they face.
 - Some highlighted that there is too much information coming from Defra so adding to this will not be of use as it will be ignored.
 - Hence, material on specific crops and locations could help target specific businesses and sourcing teams and make material more relevant to certain grower groups. A next step could be using the SHIP soil risk table to create such targeted material.

- Easily digestible guides were also found to be useful at producer meetings, particularly to engage farmers that are still not familiar with soil health.
 - The [Carbon Clarity documents](#) developed by the Royal Countryside Fund were cited as an example that was very well received.
 - The following [sector guides on soil management](#) were shared to include on the Sharepoint.
- Finding means of connecting farmers to the right advisors in local areas requires further collaboration and industry involvement.
- A [gov.uk page on regulation and farming](#) was also shared.

Next steps

- **Business can get in touch with the EA directly to access the Sharepoint and discuss this work further: fiona.tovey@environment-agency.gov.uk**
- **The EA will be a regular at SHIP meetings to build a relationship with SHIP members.**

2. Knowledge Exchange

Land Use for Net Zero (LUNZ) hub

- SSA is part of the new government-funded Land Use and Net Zero (LUNZ) Hub - a transdisciplinary, cross-sectoral community which will support the large-scale transformation of the way land is used and managed in the UK in order to achieve net zero and other nature targets.
- The hub launches in November and the SSA's role will be communications lead and co-lead on soil health.
- The hub's aims are to advance research, integrate knowledge, identify routes to impact and fast track evidence into policy according to three interlinked themes:
 - Soil health,
 - Agricultural systems,
 - Land use change.
- It is explicit that LUNZ is there to support industry as well as government to deliver UK legal commitments on net zero and the environment, increasing food security and economic growth. The SSA will be working closely with industry and other stakeholders to develop and explore plausible and innovative pathways to net zero across these three themes.
- SHIP will be used as a mechanism for connecting LUNZ with the industry across all three themes. Benefits for businesses will include:
 - Identifying and addressing research gaps and impact areas.
 - Showcasing business initiatives via the hub.
 - Fast-tracking evidence into policy.
 - Achieving alignment with government policy.
- A SHIP meeting early next year will be used to introduce SHIP members to the LUNZ hub.
- Businesses are encouraged to involve colleagues interested in specific areas of research on land use and net zero.
- The hub will generate opportunities for involvement and will ask businesses for insights.

Land App and Sainsbury's resilience farm profile

The Land App and Sainsbury's have been working together to create a resilience profile for a farm. This includes looking at connectivity of habitat, whether the farm is on peatland or high priority

flood zones, and the social value of the farm (ie footpaths). They are also keen to calculate soil risk or exposure of the farm based on soil quality.

Arla's collaboration with retailers on dairy emissions reduction

Arla is working more closely with customers to understand how they can directly invest in activities on farms to contribute to scope 3 target. Arla has its Sustainability Incentive Model which outlines some of the key levers to help farms drive their carbon footprint reductions. They are bringing farms and retailers together to get targeted investments to support positive on farm activities to help scope 3 reductions. As this work develops further details will be shared at future SHIP meetings.

Next Steps

- **The one-to-one SHIP meetings with businesses for the end of year SHIP reporting following this meeting will be an opportunity to discuss business involvement in the LUNZ hub. SHIP members are encouraged to invite colleagues interested in research on net zero, land use, soil health and agriculture systems and think about what they would like to see from the research community on such topics to discuss at the meeting.**
- **Businesses are also encouraged to attend the [Countryside COP](#) on 20–24 November and to consider doing some engagement activities on [World Soil Day](#) on the 5th of December.**

3. Consistent Metrics

Soil Association Exchange

- The Soil Association Exchange has developed guidance for farmers on soil testing.
- SSA technical advisors are providing feedback on this guidance. The SSA is keen that emerging soil assessment guidance such as this builds on existing guidance – or that where it varies, there is clarity about why and what it will deliver - multi-purpose, robust, interpretable data that can inform good practice and track improvement/degradation being the principal objective.
- Similar conversations continue with the Sustainable Food Trust and their Global Farm Metric.
- Through the LUNZ project, the SSA hopes to establish a set of universal protocols to underpin all such initiatives, including realistic estimations of time investment needed for farmers to fully engage in robust soil assessment.

Red Tractor's Greener Farms Commitment

- Red Tractor had announced that their voluntary environmental module, the Greener Farm Commitment, will be available for sign up April next year. The plan was still to use the AHDB Soil Health Scorecard for the Soil Management section, following additional technical scrutiny to finalise details.
- However, following the SHIP meeting, [the NFU announced](#) a review into the governance of the farm assurance body due to concerns around the consultation process and the potential costs farmers would face trying to implement it. Red Tractor has announced all new modules will be on hold until the review is completed.
- Retailers are keen to work through how the module can be implemented and incentivized, particularly when environmental schemes are being implemented off-shore. This can be an opportunity for consumers to know that what they are purchasing meets the same standards as what is being imported.

- On that note, the EU Horizon Soil Health Mission has welcomed the UK back in and the SSA has been invited to participate by joining the Mission think tank focussed on reducing the EU global footprint on soils. Businesses are invited to raise any issues they may have on this topic with the SSA.

SSA's Work Towards Enabling Soil Data and Metrics

- The Innovate UK bid to digitise the AHDB's Soil Health Scorecard was unsuccessful.
- The SSA's role in that project was around standardisation of protocols for soil health assessment – a task needed in order for farmers and businesses to make the investment in soil monitoring in the knowledge that the data this creates will be acceptable and meaningful.
- The SSA is now exploring other routes to this, both around scientific agreement and the establishment of a governance body to underpin a standardised methodology.
- The SSA wants to explore routes to making soil data relevant to all stakeholders, including investors or means to report on ESG commitments.
- As this project unfolds in its new form, a workshop will be taking place in January with policy makers from all four nations to compare their national soil monitoring programmes and look to establish standardisation – which in turn will help inform the elements of standardisation needed in other soil health monitoring initiatives.
 - Each nation has taken a different approach to soil monitoring. The technical details of each will be contemplated side-by-side, including the policies they are designed to achieve.
- There will be a chance for SHIP members to communicate what they need in the soil monitoring space to this workshop. A 'SHIP spokesperson' may be required to highlight the SHIP commitment businesses have signed up to, communicate the need for consistency and clarity to enable investment in soil health measuring and reporting, and the need to gain long-term confidence to invest in soil health data.
- Interested businesses can get in touch with the SSA to share their thoughts. The SSA would be happy to share the concept note on the type of governance the SSA is trying to build around this initiative with those interested.

Discussion and Q&A

- Reporting on the Taskforce on Nature-related Disclosures (TNFD) and Science Based Targets Network (SBTN) is showing that the metrics that drive corporate understanding of the risk profile of a farm can be kept simple.
 - It may be useful to think of the bare minimum soil data requirements that would help profile a farm, and whether this can be made easily accessible at a farm level so data can start to flow to a corporate level. Corporate demand will drive soil information that is required.
 - Defra's Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) has funding for soil testing, relating to regulations - joining up with such public schemes can help farmers and avoid duplicating work.
- Farmers have a lot of questions around soil sampling i.e. slurry spreading. There is low awareness when it comes to soil sampling despite it having been a requirement in regulations and there is a role for businesses to help spread this awareness.

Next Steps

- **Updates will be provided on the SSA's soil data and metrics workshop.**

4. Communications

UK Soils Awareness Week

- Based on the SSA's research for the EFRA inquiry into soil health alongside conversations with experts, [8 key asks](#) for soil health have been developed to promote over the course of the party conference season in September.
- These crystallise the SSA's mission for campaigning as we look towards an expected election in 2024, and will form the basis of a full 'manifesto for soils' that will gather support for from allied organisations. This in turn will be used to inform the public, policy makers and politicians.
- Over the coming months the SSA hopes to meet with key MPs and Lords to prepare whatever government comes to power next year with ready to go policies that prioritise soil health.
- Businesses interested in doing more advocacy work are encouraged to get involved in this work.

Next steps

- **There will be opportunities to discuss further involvement in communications work at the one-to-one SHIP meetings with businesses for the end of year 2023 SHIP reporting following this meeting.**

5. Net Zero

Since the previous SHIP meeting in April 2023, there have been no updates concerning the publishing of the GHG protocol. Following the publication of the Minimum Requirements for Farm Soil Carbon Codes document last December, the British Standards Institute has been tasked with developing a new, consensus-based, UK-wide standards' framework. The SSA and other members of the Farm Soil Carbon Advisory Board are feeding into this process. Whilst a Farm Soil Carbon Code is a long way away, projects underway such as the WWF's recent work below are informing the already developing soil carbon marketplace.

WWF Framework on GHG Removal Transaction

- Whilst the outputs of this project are yet to be finalised and published, the following was shared:
- The [WWF-Tesco partnership and the Green Alliance published a report](#) last year on the role agri-carbon markets can play in the decarbonisation of the food section.
- Since this report, Forest, Land and Agriculture (FLAG) Guidance has been published, permitting the use of removals within supply chains to contribute to climate targets.
- Hence, over the past 6 months, the WWF has been looking to understand how we can account for the removal of carbon within supply chains.
- The land based nature of the agricultural sector means it is uniquely positioned to deliver both GHG reductions and removals. To take advantage of this, there needs to be a shift in how we reduce GHG and how we use removals in practice to support achievement of Net Zero goals. However this remains largely untested.
- WWF wanted to explore what farmers working with food businesses on carbon sequestration might look like in practice, whilst acknowledging there are a number of uncertainties. The project looks at:
 - a. Understanding how the rights to the carbon should flow within the transaction.
 - b. What approaches work within the supply chains that lack transparency.

- c. Whether there are ways this can benefit farmers, suppliers and retailers.
 - d. What needs to happen to overcome some of these barriers to actions.
- A scenario was developed to look at how removals are best treated within corporate GHG accounting. The scope of the project only looks at carbon sequestration in agricultural landscapes (tree, soil, peatland).
- Two key variables were identified that affects how supply chains approach GHG accounting:
 - a. The type of supply chain (i.e. direct or indirect).
 - b. The type of transaction (i.e. trading of credits or inventory approach to scope
- From these two variables, a number of scenarios were developed and tested with stakeholders before developing a final proposed carbon flow.
- The following critical feedback points were identified in the proposed carbon flow:
 - a. Most supply chains aren't direct, so a structure that works with an indirect supply chain is critical.
 - b. There needs to be benefits across the supply chain.
 - c. Projects need to align with the SBTi's FLAG guidance and the GHG Protocol Land Sector and Removals Guidance (LSRG) - which are still in draft forms.
 - d. Traceability even within small supply chains is difficult. The LSRG as it is currently written, states that scope 3 inventory accounting requires data that can be traced back to the land management unit. To account for this limitation, concepts such as the 'supply-shed concept' are in development which defines a group of suppliers that can aggregate products so that the carbon only needs to be traced back to a common level.
- In order to overcome some of the barriers surrounding removal accounting, the following is needed:
 - a. Advocate for clarity and alignment in GHG accounting and target guidance.
 - b. Avoid credit-based approaches (to avoid double accounting according to the LSRG).
 - c. Begin piloting value chain removal projects in more direct supply chains.
 - d. Work directly with farmers where possible - in both direct and indirect supply chains.
 - e. Improve traceability in long and complex supply chains - complexity has held back developments in this area and this needs to be addressed to account for GHG removals.
 - f. Establish a long term approach to land tenure and commercial contract arrangements - to address permanence concerns.
- The research will be published in a report in the next couple of months.

Participants were also informed of work the SSA is doing with Aqualate a farming cluster who are involved in a Defra test and trial:

- These farmers have faced challenges in understanding and accessing carbon markets, something they believe is common across the country.
- The SSA has produced a report which analyses the market, some barriers to entry, and provides some recommendations to Defra on how to make the market more accessible.
- The final report will be shared with SHIP businesses and will hopefully be helpful to industry in demonstrating where both the challenges and the opportunities are, especially when considering how to align public and private investment in farm soil carbon.

Discussion and Q&A

- Participants were encouraged to share this work with relevant Net Zero colleagues and get in touch with WWF if they wish to discuss further: pmarsh@wwf.org.uk. WWF would be keen to hear more from businesses when it comes to the following questions:
 - Are businesses currently looking to integrate removals into their GHG inventory?
 - Which of these recommendations align with how they are exploring the issue?

- What current barriers prevent businesses from doing so?
- The WWF Basket will seek to gain consensus on how retailers treat carbon removals within corporate accounting - once this report has been published it will be used to inform this area of the Basket.
- Anglian Water has shown interest in this area, it may be interesting to explore how this work can bridge shared interests between water companies and food retailers.
- Scope 3 accounting has been part of WRAP's general Courthall Commitment, but the focus on removals and how to account for them was not known by participants.
- Removals will also be part of the Net Zero Collaborative Action Programme, however, due to delays on the land sector and removals guidance this work is not accelerating as fast as it should have done.

Next Steps:

- **Businesses can get in touch with WWF to discuss their framework for GHG transactions: pmarsh@wwf.org.uk.**

6. Financial Support

The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)

- After an initial delay, 2023 SFI applications opened in September, and new early payments were made in the last few weeks.
- The SSA amongst others are conscious the scheme is being rolled out without clear metrics for success, and that there is a need for better clarity for both farmers and industry on how elements of SFI relate to specific environmental outcomes.
- The National Trust have sent a letter to the government highlighting joint concerns around these outcomes, and urging the government to provide this clarity, and to show greater ambition for the scheme overall.
- The NFU have also highlighted concerns around the SFI application process, partially around the IT system not being fit for purpose. There are also issues around it not being appealing to all sectors. The NFU's recent comms on the issue can be found [here](#).
 - An announcement on the 2024 scheme is believed to be due soon, and the NFU is hoping for there to be support for carbon calculations.

Scottish Agricultural Bill

- The Scottish Government have announced their new agricultural bill, which should be formalised in Spring next year.
- Unlike DEFRA who expressed their concerns around using the term regenerative agriculture, the Scottish Government uses the term regenerative and sustainable agriculture throughout their vision for agriculture. This means they will need to define what they mean by term before the Bill is finalised next year.
- The SSA will be comparing this with what other nations are doing, especially around soils, as well as what's happening in the EU.

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Next steps and actions

- **SHIP members are asked to please provide their availability over the next two months for a one-to-one meeting with the SSA for the 2023 SHIP reporting. The report will highlight**

on-going and new business initiatives, progress in relation to six SHIP action areas, and priority areas for SHIP 2024.

- **SHIP members are encouraged to invite colleagues interested in research on net zero, land use, soil health and agriculture systems to the one-to-ones and think about what they would like to see from the research community on such topics to discuss at the meeting.**
- **SHIP members can contact the SSA if they would like help including SHIP membership in their business's ESG/CSR reporting.**
- **All meeting participants can get in touch with the EA directly to access the Sharepoint and discuss this work further: fiona.tovey@environment-agency.gov.uk**
- **The next SHIP group meeting will take place in February next year.**