

NE Organic Discussion Group

Newsletter



March 2021

Welcome to the March edition of the Newsletter. I hope you all are all well and looking forward to the spring with the lengthening days and better weather although it is still cold when you are out of the sun.

I have been busy with the meetings this week, so it is a very short Newsletter this month. I thought it would be of interest to include a summary of both meetings so I hope those who attended will forgive the repetition.

Also, it still is not too late to make suggestions of organic farms you would like to visit but never had the opportunity as I will have to start organising our virtual farm tour. The tour of Barnside, Duns hosted by Charley and Andrea Walker was very successful last year. Online presents an ideal opportunity to see somewhere we could never go for an actual visit in a half day.

NE Organic Discussion Group – Event 1 (Mini Conference – Crop/Business Management Carbon and Protein

This was the first half of our mini conference.

We had 3 excellent speakers. The first of which was Anna Sellars, Rural Business Consultant, SAC Consulting Solutions. She gave an overview and introduction to the subject of carbon. Her main take home messages were: -

- There is increasing incentive to look at carbon in relation to your farm business, including: changing government policy and climate-focused schemes; increased interest from retailers and consumers in lower carbon food; carbon footprinting enables a focus on business and enterprise efficiency, with potential benefits for productivity and cost savings.
- Around a third of farm emissions can be mitigated through efficiency gains, many of which may have cost savings to the farmer, e.g., optimising N use, livestock productivity, use of legumes in rotations – many such practices may already been common in organic systems.
- Soil carbon sequestration may be an opportunity but not a silver bullet – soil carbon can be depleted as well as increased through agriculture – and sequestration is not finite but can reach a saturation point.

She was followed by Dr Laurence Smith, Lecturer in Agroecology, Royal Agricultural University who refined the subject further and described how greenhouse gas emissions compare between organic management and conventional. His main take home messages were: -

- Meeting increasing demand to feed the world and meeting GHG emission reduction targets is a challenge.
- Organic production increases production efficiency from a GHG mitigation perspective, especially for beef and sheep and important field crops (grass-clover leys, winter wheat, winter barley)
- However, these potential benefits need to be set against the requirement for greater production elsewhere. As well as increased GHG emissions from compensatory changes in land use to make up for production shortfalls, there are substantial opportunity costs from reduced availability of land for other purposes, such as greater C storage under natural vegetation.
- Extrapolating from the UK, 100% global organic without dietary change seems unlikely to work.
- Ultimately it is unlikely that there exists any single optimal approach to achieving environmentally sustainable food production. Therefore, context-specific evaluations are required to reveal the extent to which organic systems can contribute, alongside other approaches, to multi-objective and internationally binding sustainability targets.

We then changed subject and David Lawson, Grassland Agronomist, Crops & Soils, SRUC who described how SRUC is currently investigating the potential for extracting protein and other products from White Clover. Because of its high leaf protein content and the fact that it will grow in most soil conditions white clover is an ideal candidate for bioprocessing. The long-term aim is to produce protein for human consumption along with a range of other materials such as fertiliser, fibre, and sugars.

He said the next stage in the clover processing project is to set up small scale farm-based systems based on approximately one hectare of white clover. If anyone is interested in taking part in the project, then please get in touch with David Lawson David.lawson@sruc.ac.uk

If you would like copies of the full presentations or if you would like more information or have any questions, please get in touch aileen.buchanan@sac.co.uk

NE Organic Discussion Group – Event 1 (Mini Conference - Livestock)

Livestock Marketing & Dynamic Health Planning

This was the second half of our mini conference.

We had two excellent speakers. First was Lesley Wylie, Consultant, Livestock Team, SAC Consulting. She gave a very comprehensive presentation on livestock marketing focusing on cattle and sheep. She covered: -

- Available markets
- Market specification and how to hit spec.
- Challenges

Her take home messages were: -

1. Build a relationship with whoever buys your stock – they can help with stock selection / planning for stock being ready / help with any problems.
2. Use your kill sheets and post mortem reports from the abattoir to review performance and make changes to stock selection and rations if need be to help meet the spec.
3. Tell your story – the public are interested in the sustainability, welfare, and environmental status of the food they are buying, now is the time to open a dialogue with them and keep the growth in organic red meat going.

We then changed the subject and Tim Geraghty, Veterinary Centre Manager, Veterinary Services, SRUC presented his thoughts and led a discussion on Dynamic Health Planning. In summary: -

Dynamic health planning is farmer led health planning. Vets, consultants, and nutritionists all contribute to the plan, but it is coordinated and driven by the farmer. It follows a process of continuous improvement where we set very specific targets, think ahead about what might go wrong and plan to mitigate risks. We monitor only what we absolutely need to and then review to improve the whole system for next year. Although we set annual, broad targets, risk planning and monitoring are done several times over the year, linked to stages of production. The plan therefore is a changing, living document that we re-visit at least 3 or 4 times over the year, with input and advice from a range of advisors and sources.

If you would like copies of the full presentations or if you would like more information or have any questions, please get in touch aileen.buchanan@sac.co.uk