

NORTHERN IRELAND FARMLAND BIODIVERSITY GROUP

Monday 23rd October 2006

CAFRE Greenmount Campus at 10 am

Attendees

Ian McKee (DARD EPB)
Rosalind Dempsey (DARD EPB – chair)
John Gamble (DARD EPB – minute taker)
Martin Mooney (DARD EPB)
Cllr Sean McPeake (NIBDG)
Dr Robbie McDonald (Quercus)
Dr Jim McAdam (AFBI)
Sean Convery (FWAG)
Dr Alex McGarel (WWF NI)
Aileen Lawson (UFU)
Dr Richard Crowe (DARD CMB)
Dr Mike Meharg (DOE EHS)
Paul Lynas (RSPB)
David Hawthorne (National Trust)
Richard Weyl (DOE EHS)

1. Introduction

Rosalind Dempsey welcomed the group members and asked Ian McKee to briefly outline the purpose of the Farmland Biodiversity Group.

Ian McKee explained the significance of the group and emphasised the need for simple, relevant terms of reference, focusing clearly on group achievements.

2. Terms of Reference

Rosalind Dempsey explained that the Terms of Reference (ToR) had deliberately been kept simple (2 pages) and were open for discussion. She reiterated that the group is a delivery mechanism for NI Biodiversity targets, and that tasks would be allocated as appropriate to stakeholders. Best practice, monitoring and evaluation will also be central to the group's aims.

Rosalind Dempsey then requested the views of all the group members on the ToR. These were as follows:

(a) Richard Weyl: important to maintain simple, SMART targets. There needs to be linkage with other BDGs to share issues.

- (b) David Hawthorne: there is a need for the group to seek to meet Biodiversity Action Plan targets.
Rosalind Dempsey: sustainability targets are also relevant to the group.
- (c) Paul Lynas: there should be a focus on farmland bird habitats. Meeting the 2010 targets will be a big challenge.
- (d) Mike Meharg: NI Biodiversity Targets need to be achieved – government cannot do this without stakeholder co-operation. 80% of NI is farmed land – this group is therefore essential.
- (e) Richard Crowe: there needs to be an Agri-Environment focus on biodiversity aims. AE covers more than biodiversity, and the group must go beyond AE.
- (f) Aileen Lawson: the group must reflect the needs of farmers. Targets must be met without adding to farmers' burdens.
- (g) Alex McGarel: water quality must be considered, i.e. the impact of farmland drainage on water quality targets. Water needs to be considered as a habitat.
- (h) Sean Convery: the group needs to help reduce the obstacles faced by farmers and consider dairy farming targeting.
- (i) Jim McAdam: the group must have a role in policy evaluation and monitoring. It should also identify research needs.
- (j) Robbie McDonald: need for applied research to be a tool for implementing targets. Efficacy should be measured.
- (k) Sean McPeake: undertook to relay strategic recommendations back to NI Biodiversity Group. Recognised the importance of the group for delivering policies.

Rosalind Dempsey thanked the members for their input. **It was agreed EPB would circulate the ToR around the group members, inviting feedback by the end of the first week of November. It was also agreed to invite a Forest Service representative to join the group.**

3. NI Rural Development Plan (NIRDP)

Martin Mooney gave a PowerPoint presentation on the NIRDP, highlighting objectives and the necessity to establish a coherent suite of indicators.

4. NIRDP Indicators

Rosalind Dempsey invited comments from the group members on indicators.

Robbie McDonald: serious thought is needed on statistics. Targets must be realistic, i.e. not too high. Statistical trends carry implicit understandings – they are essential but may be difficult to achieve. Comparisons with non-participant land are needed – the principle should be extended to new indicators, as this is the only way to detect improvements. Any baselines must be static. Indicators should be tractable and relevant.

Richard Weyl: species delivery and targets are not the same.

Jim McAdam: habitat quality needs to be defined; this can be affected by factors outside our control.

Mike Meharg: the early action plans were aspirational; it is now realised that they must be SMART. The public – and politicians – want to see achievements that are tangible. The group's targets must reflect this.

Sean Convery: targets must be delivered that will help farmers, also the landscape and the 'image' of farming. Farmers must be made to feel appreciated.

Aileen Lawson: Farmers need to get more credit for target delivery. Rates of payment must be reasonable, and the schemes must be accessible.

Richard Crowe: There must be a wider context, e.g. EIA, cross-compliance, context of halting habitat loss.

Alex McGarel: Anxious that any proposed NIRDP indicators integrate with BAP sustainable development indicators.

Ian McKee: AE Schemes are the main financial contributors, but other schemes and policies must be considered, e.g. LFA. Need to monitor what schemes are delivering. How important are they? Policy implications of biodiversity must be considered – value for money has to be demonstrated. AE Schemes etc. must be built into sustainability and biodiversity strategies; otherwise no funding will be available. Not all decisions on Axes 1 and 3 are made via EPB.

David Hawthome: What about OFS? There needs to be an insurance policy in terms of keeping up with changes in AE. A whole suite of schemes needs to be considered.

Martin Mooney: targets are not yet in place – this would be part of a suite of indicators. NIRDP has to be translated into local terms.

Rosalind Dempsey: Biodiversity is much bigger than AE. There is scope for this group to advise on other policies. EIA does have an impact on sustainability and biodiversity. There is an opportunity to bid for funding under the comprehensive spending review. A broad discussion of indicators would be helped by bilateral discussions.

Sean McPeake: there is a need to demonstrate results to government in order to get support for continuing these measures.

Paul Lynas: the group's members must work together to produce consistent indicators.

It was agreed that EPB will circulate draft NIRDP indicators to group members for comment as soon as possible. EHS would also circulate BAP indicators.

5. Farmland Species Sub-group

Rosalind Dempsey noted that several sub-groups had met in relation to other BDGs. She asked for members' views on whether a bird sub-group should be set up for the Farmland BDG.

Robbie McDonald: SAP working groups could come together under one umbrella.

Paul Lynas: a co-ordination group could be set up to discuss cross-cutting issues.

Aileen Lawson: a further sub-group would be too time-consuming as members are often involved in several BDGs.

Mike Meharg: each group fits a particular circumstance, i.e. response to SAPs or need for SAPs. A species sub-group, broader than a birds sub-group, would be useful.

Richard Crowe: co-ordination is needed between various BDGs. Management of species groups could interact with Farmland BDG.

It was agreed that a species sub-group, rather than a birds sub-group, will be formed by DARD EPB.

6. Any Other Business

Sean Convery: is it possible to have a schedule of decisions/meetings of the group?

Rosalind Dempsey: A work programme will be drafted and issued for comment prior to the next meeting.

DOE EHS will circulate copies of all the other BDG work programmes.

It was further agreed that CNCC would be kept informed on the Farmland BDG by Alex McGarel.

7. Date of next meeting – March 2007 unless otherwise notified to members.