

Minutes of the Farmland Biodiversity Delivery Group Meeting

Board Room, Lindesay Hall, Loughry Campus

Thursday 4th February 2010

Present:

R Crowe (Chair)	DARD CMU – Development Branch
A Galbraith	DARD CMU – Delivery Branch
G McRoberts	DARD CMU – Delivery Branch
D Garrett	DARD Environmental Policy Branch
M Meharg	NIEA Biodiversity Unit
R Weyl	NIEA Biodiversity Unit
J McAdam	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
A Lawson	Ulster Farmers Union
C Barnett	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
P Davidson	National Trust
H Kilpatrick	Ulster Wildlife Trust
P Casement	Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside
M Harnett	NI Biodiversity Group
R Wilson	NI Local Government Association

Apologies

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).

Welcome and Introductions

R Crowe welcomed all present to the meeting and outlined recent restructuring within DARD Countryside Management Unit (CMU). Head of CMU is Dr S Kennedy and CMU has three branches – Delivery, Development and Compliance.

R Crowe stated that the chair of the group is being taken over by A Galbraith.

R Crowe detailed the potential impact of EU Single Farm Payment audit disallowance penalties on NI and the possible implications for biodiversity. He also informed those present that NICMS is planned to open in early 2010 and is awaiting an announcement from the DARD Minister M Gildernew.

All present gave introductions and outlined their respective roles and interest in farmland biodiversity.

Update on Biodiversity Delivery Groups in NI and wider UK

R Weyl (NIEA) provided an update on the development and progress of biodiversity delivery groups within NI. NIEA have set up BDGs for farmland, peatland and uplands, native woodland, wetlands, marine and species.

Priority habitats have been assigned to the relevant BDGs and the new NI priority species list (over 400) are to be assigned to BDGs in the next few months.

BDGs are the approved mechanism for delivering the targets for each priority habitat and species within NI and report to NI Biodiversity Group. All groups are viewed as partnerships and members must contribute to the delivery of biodiversity.

R Weyl highlighted the 2009 NIBG report on the Delivery of NI Biodiversity Strategy and its recommendations.

Within the UK regions biodiversity is a devolved responsibility and the BDG approach is being implemented across the UK regions.

A Galbraith (DARD CMU) reported on a recent meeting in England of the UK Lowland Farmland Group. A Galbraith stated that all UK regions were present however there was an overall lack of knowledge, co-ordination and standardisation across the UK regions. The UK group was unclear on its role.

M Meharg (NIEA) stated that both CNCC and NIBG oversee and co-ordinate the actions of NIEA and the various biodiversity delivery groups.

P Casement (CNCC) stated that a forum for good practice was required and the UK needs to speak as a whole in order to feed into EU policy.

Terms of Reference (TOR)

R Crowe referred all present to current TOR document, which is viewed as a working document.

R Weyl reported that traditional orchards are to be added to the list of priority habitats and relevant priority species will be assigned in due course. All action plans and targets are under review.

R Crowe asked all present to comment on the main issues affecting biodiversity.
A summary of points raised is given below

Scrub and rush invasion on priority grassland habitats.

Disallowance and eligibility issues linked to Single Farm Payment.

Priority habitat list does not take account of crop selection.

Opportunities for research on scrub and rush control and heather regeneration.

Fragmentation of habitats and impact on biodiversity.

DARD agri-environment schemes should seek to link habitats.

Impacts of climate change.

Landscape scale approach to habitat management – RSPB projects on lowland wet grassland and blanket bogs.

Guidance to farmers on farm mapping and eligibility issues is an urgent need.

Loss of positive management at end of agri-environment scheme agreements.

Mechanised methods of scrub control to be tested.

Focus on the delivery of current habitat action plans
Monitoring of agri-environment schemes should deliver data on recovery of both priority habitats and species.
TOR to include to include delivery in the text.
TOR to focus on co-ordinating and facilitating delivery rather than actual delivery.

It was agreed for Farmland Biodiversity Delivery Group to meet twice per year and membership of the group was discussed.

Action: R Weyl to update TOR list of habitats. List of species to be forwarded within 6 months.

Action: J McAdam to provide a summary of current research projects for next meeting.

Action: R Wilson to confirm if she can represent the local biodiversity officers Biodiversity Forum as well as NILGA.

Action: Members to email R Crowe with any additions to the group.

Draft Action Plan

R Crowe agreed with members that the current draft action plan dated February 2007 requires updating.

R Weyl stressed the importance of all group members to take actions forward.

Action: R Crowe, A Galbraith and R Weyl to update draft action plan and circulate to members for next meeting. Members to forward comments to R Crowe.

Reporting on Farmland Biodiversity Habitats

Reporting was discussed with views of group members sought.

M Harnett (NIBG) stated reporting was very important to prove to NIBG that actions and targets are being achieved. Lack of data was a key issue in the 2009 NIBG report.

R Crowe and R Weyl both stressed need for reporting within the habitat action plans both at NI and UK levels and input of data into BARS discussed.

R Crowe stated the group could play a positive role in developing initiatives to maintain and enhance farmland biodiversity whilst enabling those farming the land to retain their eligibility to claim Single Farm Payment.

E Lawson (UFU) asked that DARD issue guidance and advice to landowners on SFP eligibility and scrub/rush control as soon as possible.

Action: R Weyl to forward 2009 report on habitats to group members.

Action: R Crowe and R Weyl to assess recording in draft action plan and prioritise actions.

Date of Next Meeting

A Galbraith to email group members with potential meeting dates for April 2010.