Biodiversity recovery, clean water in the River Avon, and net zero farming by 2040 – new Environmental Farmers Group sets out its bold ambitions

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Nature will be protected and enhanced on an unprecedented scale, with the formation of a pioneering new landscape-scale partnership of farmers in the Hampshire Avon Valley. Expected to cover over 40,000 hectares – or around one third the area of all England's National Nature Reserves - the Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) is the first of its kind in the UK, with 80 farmers united to deliver biodiversity recovery, clean water in the River Avon, and net zero farming by 2040.

Harnessing the enthusiasm of seven existing Farmer Clusters in the Avon catchment, the potential of the new Agri-environment Schemes, and future environmental trades, the EFG will utilise opportunities to mitigate carbon consumption, offset biodiversity loss, and reduce phosphate and nitrate levels in watercourses while continuing to produce food.

The new Environmental Farmers Group will offer organisations looking for large-scale environmental trades the advantages of dealing with one body, rather than lots of individual farmers, and the opportunity to benefit from access to recognised scientific monitoring, supported by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT).

Teresa Dent CBE, Chief Executive of the GWCT, said:

"This is a very inspiring development which allows the farmers to drive how they will collectively deliver the environmental goods and services that government and society wants into the future. By co-ordinating at real scale (this is the biggest chalk stream catchment in England at 170,000 ha), they can be ambitious about what they want to achieve and be fairly rewarded for their efforts. I am particularly excited that the farmers are developing a conservation plan for the whole catchment looking at how to achieve their environmental ambitions. This is the first time that farmers have come together at this scale to benefit conservation".

Teresa developed the idea following discussions with NFU President Minette Batters and a group of Avon Valley farmers in 2020, and Minette is delighted to see the project come to life: *"I am proud to be part of the Lower Avon Farmer Cluster, where we have doubled the number of nesting lapwing in this part of the valley – we could never have done that without the farmers working together. Now the farmers from seven adjoining clusters have come together and formed a cooperative encompassing more than 40,000 hectares – it's farmer-led and farmer-owned, backed by technical professional expertise and most importantly it has brought tenants and landowners together to establish these new trades."*

At a time when international conflicts threaten to disrupt normal supply chains, the EFG is balancing long-term environmental aims with the immediate need to produce food as locally and as efficiently as possible. By optimising best performing areas, there will always be the opportunity to both make room for nature and feed the nation. As good environmental performance shares many common factors with good crop production, be it data collection, mapping or understanding the economic and natural potential of your land, the farmers involved are committed to delivering both aims.

The EFG evolved out of the Farmer Cluster model piloted by the GWCT with Defra and Natural England between 2013-2015 and pioneered by the farmers in the Marlborough Downs Nature Improvement Area from 2012.

Through the group, farmers in the Avon catchment can aggregate the power of their Farmer Clusters to deliver ambitious environmental outcomes. The farmers involved have already boosted red-listed wildlife in the area, with one Cluster doubling the number of corn buntings on their land and another bringing about lapwing recovery in the Avon Valley in conjunction with the GWCT.

Rob Shepherd, a farmer who leads the independently funded Allenford Farmer Cluster to the south of Salisbury is chairing the EFG and is excited about the potential for real change.

"Joining the EFG feels like a natural next step from being part of a Cluster", said Rob. "We want to build on our landscape-scale conservation successes from the bottom up and we believe that we will command the respect of conservation and government agencies by working in tandem with them and other farmers. In time, developers and planners will see EFG as the 'go to' platform for environmental

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trades".

The Farmer Clusters which form the core of the EFG have a proven track record in recovery of species such as lapwing and threatened butterflies like the dark-green fritillary and small blue, which have been declining elsewhere. This should now, through the EFG, start reaping greater financial reward by enabling member farmers to access new income streams.

Josh Stratton, whose family has farmed west of Salisbury for three generations, also sits on the board of the EFG and shares Rob's ambition, commenting *"I have been really impressed by the willingness of farmers to join EFG and buy into its ambition."*

All members pay a small subscription fee, sign up to its environmental ambitions and gain access to larger, quicker and better environmental trades. These trades will put businesses with offsetting or enhancement needs in contact with farmers who are best placed to enhance the environment they manage. The economic value of these environmental trades is underpinned on one side by what it costs the landowner to provide the environmental gain and on the other side by what 'value' is unlocked for the business by virtue of the offset.

Tasked with securing these trades is Christopher Sparrow, who served as Head of Rural at the Duchy of Lancaster between 2014 and 2020, following a decade managing the Boughton Estate in Northamptonshire, and is now working with GWCT.

Christopher is delighted that the group has launched at a time when farmers need it most. *"Loss of Pillar I funding means the search for replacement income is on. Natural Capital Services offer an opportunity to deliver goods which, as farmers, we understand and can present to both the public and private sectors", he notes. "Operating at scale will assist in achieving good governance, economic strength and physical efficiency in delivery of these supplies which will, we believe, be critical to attracting and securing customers who share our values and core objective of improving the underlying environmental performance of the Avon catchment."*

You can learn more about the group by visiting its website at www.environmentalfarmersgroup.co.uk.

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Notes to editors

Please contact Kate Williams, Communications Officer, kwilliams@gwct.org.uk or 07592 025476, or Joe Dimbleby on jdimbleby@gwct.org.uk or 07708 200856.

The **Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust** www.gwct.org.uk is an independent wildlife conservation charity which carries out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 23 post-doctoral scientists and 50 other research staff with expertise in areas such as birds, insects, mammals, farming, fish and statistics. We undertake our own research as well as projects funded by contract and grant-aid from Government and private bodies.

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