# World famous chalk streams will benefit from expanded Environmental Farmers Group

**Wednesday 28 June, 2023**

Thirty-one farmers of the Test and Itchen catchments in Hampshire are set to join the 147 neighbouring farmers already supporting the Environmental Farmers Group (EFG) making 178 farms, covering 81,344 hectares, the largest initiative of its kind.

The EFG was set up to help its members navigate the carbon, phosphate and biodiversity offset market, giving them an opportunity to replace the loss of subsidy by implementing conservation measures on their land to mitigate developments elsewhere.

Simon Packer, director of regional planning consultancy Turley, welcomed the news: “The EFG is a very interesting and encouraging initiative and I’m pleased to hear that the Test and Itchen Group is joining the cooperative.

"There was an increase in nutrient mitigation schemes in the area a couple of years ago, but the credits available are rapidly being consumed and I’m not convinced there is sufficient alternative capacity coming through. I can also see strong evidence of increased demand for off-site biodiversity offset solutions.”

**Environmental track record and clear goals**

The group’s expansion will make restoration of rare chalk stream habitats a key component of the EFG’s three principle aims of biodiversity and species recovery, clean water and net carbon zero farming by 2040.

The farmers involved already have a proven track record of delivering measurable improvements on the ground. Joe Edwards, manages the Middleton Estate, which has dramatically improved the water quality along its three-mile stretch of the Test.

He said: “We set out to recover the river combining a wide range of measures including bringing back ranunculus and other habitats that the insects will naturally thrive in and encouraging wild brown trout reproduction.

"The result was when we tested the water for 300 chemicals, it showed that the water’s cleaner when it leaves Middleton than when it entered.

"There are other private land managers on the Test who are starting to think about implementing similar management and I believe the EFG’s conservation plan, led by GWCT Chief Exec Teresa Dent, will succeed in protecting the river.”

Improving water quality will be a central aim, but the two catchments have many other spectacular natural habitats and species, which need protecting and enhancing, including rare chalk downland wildflowers.

James Hewetson-Brown runs Ashe Warren Farm near the source of the Test. Alongside his arable operation he and his wife Claire set up Wildflower Turf Ltd.

**Watch and listen to James explaining the benefits of being part of the EFG.**

James said: “Recently research showed that half our native plants have declined over the past 20 years. Hampshire chalk downland is famous for its wildflowers and we have encouraged their return through managing margins round the edges of our fields.

"The EFG has great potential to unlock funding to create new and better networks of these type of measures and restore wildflowers to the countryside.

"Farmers are in so many ways best placed to deliver really good biodiversity because they have the equipment and practical understanding to make it work and by joining together, they can achieve it on a scale that will make a real difference.”

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The EFG cooperative is a ground-breaking, farmer-led approach to landscape-scale conservation. As well as meeting the challenges of nature recovery and climate change on a huge scale, it will support farmers to deliver increased food security through a blend of public and private funding, which would otherwise be difficult for individual farm businesses to access.

While benefitting from being part of a larger cooperative, the Test and Itchen group's local knowledge and cultural identity will be key to its success.

Many of the families involved have farmed the same land for generations representing centuries of continuous connection with the local countryside. They are experts at delivering practical land management and personally invested for the sake of future generations.

**Supported by a scientific organisation**

The EFG is convened by the GWCT, whose scientific research lies behind pioneering agri-environment schemes.

GWCT Chief Exec Teresa Dent said: "At the end of 2022 the Westminster government set out its legally-binding environmental targets. For instance, it wants to reverse declines in species abundance by 2030. At the same time there is an imperative to increase UK food security.

"We applaud these ambitions but note that government is going to need to harness the environmental delivery of the farmers and land managers, the Working Conservationists, who look after the 72% of land that is in private stewardship in England.

"The addition of the farmers of the Test and Itchen to the EFG is an important step on the way to achieving this. We just need every farmer to improve on their previous best and the combined effect of them working together could be significant."

**Accredited by a trusted body, brokering a blended finance model**

The environmental auditing and monitoring of EFG projects will be carried out by Natural Capital Advisory (NCA). Funding will be a combination of public money in the form of Environmental Land Management Schemes and private finance from sponsorship, green investments and offset markets.

NCA chief exec Christopher Sparrow said: "In an often confusing and uncertain emerging market, which requires long-term commitments, landowners and investors can be reassured that NCA has the right professional experience to deliver the highest quality advice and ongoing monitoring service.

"Our partnership with EFG will appeal to investors who want to see tangible guaranteed environmental outcomes and contribute to the restoration of some of our most iconic landscapes, places they can visit to see the improvements for themselves."

**Ends**

Notes for editors:

EFG was formed when lead farmers from several Farmer Clusters in Wiltshire and Hampshire catchments came together at GWCT's suggestion (and with the endorsement of the NFU) to create a farmer-led, farmer-owned environmental cooperative. The aim is to deliver environmental enhancement over a larger scale and achieve fair financial reward for the farmers for delivering this change. EFG has recently completed its first trade worth c. £1m and has a further trading pipeline of £11m. The group is going from success to success and was recently used as a case study in both the UK Government's *Green Finance Strategy* and the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission's *Natural Capital Markets* report.

**The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust** gwct.org.uk – providing research-led conservation for a thriving countryside. The GWCT is an independent wildlife conservation charity which has carried out scientific research into Britain's game and wildlife since the 1930s. We advise farmers and landowners on improving wildlife habitats. We employ 22 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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