

**Summary Minutes of the Soil Association AGM  
Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019  
Spear House, 51 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6AD**



**Present:**

**Staff:** Liz Bowles (Associate Director Farming and Land Use), Helen Browning (CEO), Martin Dawson (COO), Jo Lewis (Policy & Strategy Director), Louisa Pharoah (Director of Fundraising) and Kate Still (Farming Advisor - Animal Health and Welfare).

**Trustees:** Gabriel Scally (Chair) and Martin Nye.

## **1.0 Welcome & Introduction - Gabriel Scally – Chair of Trustees**

Gabriel welcomed everyone to the AGM and provided an overview of the agenda.

## **2.0 Financial & governance – Martin Dawson**

Martin Dawson gave a brief overview of charity and group finances. The Charity generated a surplus in unrestricted funds of £347k in the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019. As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 unrestricted reserves of the Charity were some £2.5M, the majority of which comprises the Charity's investment in its HQ building and its IT systems. The Charity's free reserves (those amounts readily available to mitigate unexpected adverse events) stood at £361k, below the target of £400k set by Trustees. The balance of £5.1M in Charity restricted funds represents grant income that will be applied to expenditure in future years in accordance with the funder's direction. The Charity's trading subsidiary Soil Association Certification grew its income by 4.6% compared to the prior financial year, with particular growth in organic food and forestry sectors.

Members were directed to the summary financial schedules contained in the 2019 Impact Report "From the Ground Up" distributed to members and reminded that the full Statutory Accounts are available from the Soil Association website, Charity Commission and Companies House.

During the year the Trustees Joanne Ingleby and Rachel Martino decided to retire early and the Board's Trustee and Recruitment Committee are actively engaged in seeking new Trustees. Members were reminded that within the member's magazine "Living Earth" the Charity will periodically invite expressions of interest from members for the position of Trustee. Martin Dawson gave a brief overview of charity finances including restricted and unrestricted income, and membership and legacy income which has reduced this past year. He then gave a brief overview of Group income figures and Certification income. He explained that unrestricted funds – building, capital assets, IT systems, free charitable reserves - stand at £360k which is slightly lower than we would like.

Martin invited members to look out for opportunities to apply when trustee vacancies are advertised.

## **3.0 Where are we now? – Helen Browning**

Helen Browning introduced the section and explained that, as we approach Brexit, today seemed a good opportunity to share an update on how far we've come with our eight policy priorities. These priorities include investing in healthy soils, child health, zero carbon farming by 2050, funding for farmer-led research and stronger support for organic farming.

#### **4.0 Farming for the Future - Liz Bowles**

Liz Bowles discussed a number of projects and successes over the past year, explaining that the current political and public environment means that our work is more relevant than ever, and people are truly listening to what we have to say.

Notable projects over the past year include:

- The release of our Agroforestry Handbook. Liz provided an overview of the benefits of agroforestry and how this handbook is helping more farmers make these benefits a reality.
- The legacy of our Great Soils Project, which has left a range of information around soil assessment and improvement. Liz also discussed our ongoing campaigning for government support for soil improvements, and the growth of field labs exploring soil health.
- The launch in January 2019 of the FABulous Farmers programme, working with partners across Europe to support farmers transitioning to agroecological methods.
- Our support of the RSA's call for agroecological farming, and our promotion of the IDDRI report.
- An ongoing focus on farmer-led research through the Innovative Farmers network, which now has 48 live field labs. Liz explained that the value of farmer-led research is increasingly acknowledged but that more needs to be done to shift focus and funding to agricultural research that is farmer centric, so we are calling for a minimum of 10% of funding to be directed this way.
- A commission by WRAP to run field labs on reducing waste on farm.
- Ongoing increase of land in organic conversion, alongside an ever-growing demand for organic food partly led by campaigns such as Organic September.

#### **Questions: How is the NFU responding to our calls for agroecology future?**

We work with NFU as closely as possible, and it's important that government has a unified voice. To do this we need to define what we mean by agroecological, as NFU has both organic and non-organic members.

#### **Do the companies you work with pay you for expertise?**

Yes.

**We need to get carbon out of the air – the quickest way to get carbon into the ground is to plant trees but grassland can absorb carbon too, are Soil Association looking at this?**

Yes, we are campaigning on this, including demonstrating the benefits of grassland and hedges.

#### **Could composting be a mechanism to build soil fertility?**

There is an Innovative Farmers field lab looking at this.

#### **A 'good life' for farm animals within 10 years**

Kate Still discussed our work to improve animal welfare through our standards, and through projects with farmers. Notable updates included:

- Reducing antibiotic usage in farming – as part of the RELACS project we are trialling application of essential oils, used in France, as a way of reducing antibiotics in cows.
- Training wider industry inspectors including Red Tractor to champion robust welfare assessment as standard.
- As part of our policy work, inputting via the Farm Animal Welfare Forum to help develop new public goods payments for good welfare practices.

- Standards Review – our new standards, launched in Spring, include key changes relating to animal welfare. For example, emphasis is placed on the size and quality of range provided for poultry.

## 5.0 Food for Life - Jo Lewis

Jo Lewis gave an update on our work to improve food procurement in public settings such as schools, hospitals and care homes. She discussed that we are in a dietary health crisis, particularly relating to children's food and health and explained that our approach intends that all children should grow up with access to good sustainable food. Notable updates included:

- Our State of the Nation report reached 94 million people through a range of channels including national media.
- Our Food for Life Served Here awards have reached a milestone, with more than 2 million meals now being served daily.
- The launch of Food for Life Get Togethers, a Lottery-funded programme seeking to connect generations through growing, cooking and sharing food.
- The 2019 Out to Lunch report once again called on high street restaurants to serve children's meals that are responsibly sourced and well-balanced, and included supermarket cafes for the first time. The campaign has had a significant impact on organic sourcing by high street chains and there has been a positive reaction from restaurants pledging to serve children more vegetables.

## 6.0 Discussion topics from attendees

**With growing interest in reforming agriculture and the urgency of tackling climate change, the Silver and Gold FFL standard don't look very ambitious any more. Are there plans to change them, or introduce a new Platinum level?**

Jo explained that there are no immediate plans to change the FFL standards. It is important that people can achieve the standards when dealing with limited budgets and remember that FFL is a voluntary scheme. Right now, doesn't feel like the right time to be making changes. However, there is work going on in this area in other ways – for example, the Green Brexit Report points towards countries where government (and government budgets) are behind improving standards of food in public settings. And we will be pushing for improvements to be made as part of the National Food Strategy.

**How dangerous is the spread of commercial composting & spread of plastics/contaminants on land?**

It is a challenge, and we do need to be tougher. But we are working to reduce key contaminants such as harmful herbicides.

**Eve Balfour – “A voice of the movement”: membership down, organic managed land down, reserves critical. Are 8 objectives too many and is the SA 'key message' getting lost?**

We are unique, important and special *because* we work so broadly – our remit has always been to research and inform around the relationship between the health of soil, plant, animal and man. We will always focus, where we can, on the areas where we can make the biggest difference but it's important to be working on a number of tracks in parallel. Our remit is about investing in a better future, and we can only do this by tackling all the issues. The challenge comes in fundraising, because our work is hard to explain.

**How can you protect poultry from foxes in forested settings?**

Kate agreed that there is a need to be cautious that poultry are protected from predators when in outdoor and woodland settings. She explained that robust electric fencing is often the best solution – and that this is something that needs to be thought about when planning ranges for poultry.

### **Are SA working with any agricultural colleges? And is the messaging 'getting in'?**

Yes. Liz gave the example of our work with Bridgewater College, who now have a Principles of Organic module. The Royal Agricultural University is also interested in a similar topic. She explained that there is always more that could be done, with more resource to do it. She also explained that to work with the colleges, you need to be talking to them at the right time for curriculum changes.

### **How will Brexit affect income for SA?**

There are several immediate risks: 1 - Europe must recognise UK standards once we exit, and there will be a risk period directly after exiting but we've been working hard to make this as short a period as possible. 2 – there will be a risk to businesses looking to export, so we need to help them adapt quickly. 3 – the potential of a recession. We saw a drop in organic food sales during the last recession. We need to be selling the basics, stay agile and hope that citizens remain confident. Long-term we are looking to establish an office in the EU to make things easier.

### **Pesticides are an issue in more than just farmland – are you working with any big landowners?**

We work with the National Trust and RSA. National Trust are very supportive of moving things in the right direction, but it's hard very difficult with tenanted land. We should be really concerned about land that's not in agricultural use: we believe all land should be brought into the framework - golf courses in particular have very high pesticide use, and owners should be incentivised.

This year we have worked with Pesticide Action Network (PAN) UK, to launch an expose on pesticides mixtures found in our food, water and soil, which could be harming humans and wildlife. The report makes a number of recommendations to the UK government, including calling for the introduction of a pesticide reduction target and a system for monitoring the impacts of pesticide cocktails on human health and environment.

## **7.0 Fundraising and legacy pledges – Louisa Pharoah**

Louisa Pharoah provided a breakdown of where our unrestricted income came from in the past year, with around 75% from grants after a grant of £5m. She discussed learnings from the last year which show, more than anything, that funders have trust that their money is going to a good place when they donate to us. She then noted that our core objectives for

the year ahead were to increase membership and grow our legacy fundraising – she directed attendees to the Legacy leaflet provided.

### **Question: What is being done to grow membership? Is there any demographic info re the members?**

We are in the middle of a large membership acquisition which will include putting leaflets in veg boxes and magazines, linking up with organic food stores, and running digital acquisition work.