

# Minutes

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<b>Title of meeting:</b>	Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF) Sub Group on Agricultural Pollution
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<b>Location:</b>	Microsoft Teams Meeting
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<b>Date of meeting:</b>	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2023
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<b>Members present:</b>	Rhys A. Jones, NRW Board Member (Chair) Dav Letellier, NRW Brad Welch, NRW Dennis Matheson, TFA Nichola Salter, NRW Bernard Griffiths, FUW David Ball, AHDB Russ Thomas, HCC Ieuan S. Davies, NRW Creighton Harvey, CFF Chris R. Thomas, NRW Matthew Walters, Welsh Government Einir Williams, Farming Connect Kate Snow, United Utilities Sarah Hetherington, NRW
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<b>Additional attendees:</b>	John Reed, Avara Foods
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<b>Apologies:</b>	Rachel Lewis-Davies, NFU Cymru Andrew Chambers, Welsh Government Sarah Jones, Dwr Cymru Welsh Water Fraser McAuley, CLA Marc Williams, NRW
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<b>Secretariat:</b>	Bronwen Martin, NRW
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## **Item 1. Introductions, Apologies and Declaration of Interest**

1. Professor Rhys A. Jones (NRW Board Member and WLMF Sub Group Chair) welcomed all to the Microsoft Teams meeting and noted apologies.
2. This is Rhys' first meeting as the new WLMF Sub Group Chairperson. Rhys thanked those who were able to make it to the informal get together at Bwlch Nant yr Arian Visitors Centre last week, it was a great opportunity to meet people in person and thank Zoe Henderson for her time as Chairperson.
3. The meeting is being recorded for the purpose of capturing the minutes and the digital file will be deleted once the meeting minutes have been approved.
4. No declarations of interest were raised in respect of agenda items.
  - NB: All members of the group have completed declaration of interest forms already but should also declare if they have an interest in anything on the agenda.

## **Item 2. Member Introductions**

5. This was an opportunity for those present to briefly introduce themselves to Rhys. The group took turns to briefly introduce themselves.
6. Bernard Griffiths, FUW mentioned that this will be his last meeting because he is due to retire in June 2023. Rhys thanked Bernard for all of his valuable contributions within this group and wished him all the best for his retirement.

## **Item 3. Review of Minutes and actions**

7. Rhys confirmed that once the meeting minutes have been reviewed and formally agreed by the group, they will be published on the NRW website for the public to access. Therefore, it is important that the minutes are an accurate record of the meetings.
8. The group reviewed the previous meeting minutes from 27<sup>th</sup> March. No comments or suggested amendments were received in respect of the March meeting minutes.
9. Bronwen Martin shared the actions log and the group reviewed the outstanding actions. Verbal updates were provided where possible.

## **Item 4. Matters Arising**

10. The group was encouraged to discuss any matters arising from the previous meeting minutes, relevant documents, or recent topics.
11. No matters arising were raised by the group.

## **Item 5. Discussion: Future direction of the group**

12. This was an opportunity to discuss the future direction of the group, share ideas and plan the group's forward look.

13. Rhys said with a change in chairperson, there is an opportunity to review the ways in which we approach agricultural pollution through this group. It is also a good opportunity for us to take stock of where we are, recognise the legacy that Zoe Henderson has left as the previous Chair, but also think about ways in which we can build on that as we move forward.
14. Rhys mentioned the idea of having rotating chairperson for the group. This might potentially help to set priorities and members would be able to take ownership of the group's agenda and discussion items over a certain period. Rhys asked for the group's views on this idea and whether people were interested in having a rotating chair.
15. Creighton Harvey agreed that it is good idea, but it would be good to get familiar with Rhys before the rotating chair starts. Creighton suggested that Rhys could chair the next three or four meetings and then it could be passed to a rotating chair. Creighton said this might not work on a monthly basis and each chair would need to have a set period (e.g., three months) so there is some degree of permanence. Rhys agreed that it would be good for him to get an understanding of the group and to chair it for a while before handing over to someone. The suggestion of chairing for a three-month period would provide an opportunity for setting meaningful agendas with specific themes.
16. Bernard Griffiths, FUW, said it won't affect him due to his retirement but there is something to be said for having the continuity of a single Chair. People get used to the presentation and format of one chair, especially over Microsoft Teams meetings. However, this would not be quite as important if we took up the suggestion of having a set Chair for three months.
17. Dav Letellier, NRW mentioned that this group currently meets on a monthly basis and asked whether the group are happy with that frequency. This is this a good time to review the occurrence of the meetings (e.g., too few or too many). Rhys said if there were fewer meetings, there would be less demand on any given Chair. Initially it was surprising to Rhys that the Sub Group meets more frequently than the main WLMF. However, agricultural pollution and water pollution, are very high on the political agenda at the moment and reducing the number of meetings would not send a great signal at this time. Although frequency is an important consideration for this discussion.

Creighton suggested that those who have been a part of this group for some time, are familiar the style of the meetings so that is unlikely to change much. Regarding the frequency of meetings, Creighton said it's important that we meet regularly and monthly is appropriate. We never seem to have difficulty in filling the agenda. We also work in an area which is fast changing for example regulations, consultations and the various reviews taking place. It is important that this group meets monthly because it is a great place for exchanges of information.

18. Ieuan Stephen Davies, NRW said monthly meetings are appropriate but there should be an opportunity to meet more frequently when needed (e.g., a task and finish group working towards upcoming deadlines or working on various actions from the group).
19. Dennis Matheson, TFA said he would prefer continuity with the chairperson because if they are changing often, then you have to start building a relationship all over again. Regarding the frequency of meetings, originally, they were monthly because the group were producing a report for the Minister with a tight deadline. Dennis said it depends whether this group is going to take on discussions relating to other forms of pollution,

such as phosphate, ammonia, clean air etc. At the moment, these are being looked at by other groups and are often covering the same ground that we have already covered. If this group was to embrace all pollutants, then we would definitely need to have frequent meetings. Rhys said the relationship between this group and other groups is an important point and we need to make sure that we are not duplicating work. We need to think about how we might join up the activities of certain groups. Rhys said he is keen to establish a programme of work and it will be important to bring people together from various backgrounds as an opportunity to share ideas, insights and ultimately thrash out some of these issues and challenges. A programme of work will help to actually address some issues and produce materials.

20. Einir Williams, Farming Connect, said she can see both the positives and the negatives of a rotating chair. However, meetings in the past have been quite lengthy and members are juggling other meetings as well. Rhys acknowledged that the calendar invite is populated with a four-hour meeting, but Bronwen has assured him that meetings never go on for that long. Therefore, if we had those as a maximum of two-hour slots then that is more than enough time.
21. Ieuan highlighted the close link to the work of the SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group and the importance of not duplicating work. Reporting back to this group will be vital to avoid repeating discussions. Ieuan mentioned the circular economy concept in regard to agriculture. The Agricultural Technical Group is looking at phosphorus issues but are not really addressing the wider issues. Some of the wider things that are coming up within the Agricultural Technical Group could be looked at by this group to address Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR).
22. Bernard said this group has gone on site visits in the past and have gained a lot from seeing things in practice. Rhys agreed that site visits are an important aspect of the group's work, but the key is to get the balance right between the types of meetings (e.g., virtual online meetings and in-person site visits).
23. Ieuan asked about the Terms of Reference and whether the group needs to develop short positions on things like nutrient trading and some of the other innovative things that are emerging. Rhys said it is important for the group to have a view on developments, issues, and challenges. The group should have a role in shaping some of the initiatives too. Bernard reminded the group that the stakeholders involved in the phosphate summit are the same people who have signed up to the action plan, so we have to be careful there is not a contradiction with things.
24. Rhys summarised the discussion. Regarding the rotating chair, there sounds as though there is scope for some kind of middle ground. Rhys could remain as chair, but over a three-month period he will have discussions with each specific organisation represented on the group to develop a programme of activities and themes. Rhys said this will encourage him to visit members and understand more about the challenges faced by each organisation. We could then jointly devise an agenda of themes that the group can discuss over a three-month period. This would give joint ownership between Rhys as chair and the turn of whichever organisation – individual organisations represented on the group have an opportunity to shape the agenda in conjunction with Rhys. This approach could be trialled and if it doesn't work, then we can come back to this and see whether there are other options to explore.

## Item 6. Avara Foods

25. John Reed, Director of Avara Foods joined the meeting to share some learnings from the work his organisation has undertaken. John said the discussion would be generally English focused on the basis that the majority of Avara's business is on that side of the border. Avara is a large poultry business producing broiler and turkeys across England. Herefordshire has been one of the main operating areas and in that catchment area there are about 120 farms in the supply chain, of which a hundred of those are in Herefordshire.
26. John discussed the general accusations towards poultry and in particular Avara, being the main polluter of the river. John explained that the biggest concern is the lack of science and data for this issue. The Lancaster University RePhOKUs Project motivated Avara to do something. Avara recognised the river issues and are well aware of what the river is like, and it is has certainly not been where it ought to be in the last few years. Avara looked at the Lancaster RePhOKUs report and felt it was directionally correct, but they had some concerns about the detail and numbers (e.g., based on quite outdated tables). Avara is also interested in the amount of citizen scientists sampling from river systems and John mentioned the work that Cardiff University are doing but he has not seen any outputs of this work yet.
27. In the absence of data, Avara felt they should do their own research and wanted to look at the input-output of phosphorus in the supply chain and then try and compare that (where possible) with the RePhOKUs report. They did some calculations as well as taking samples of manure and excretion from all of the farms.
28. John mentioned the first thing they looked at was their own input-output balance. The phosphorus input is through feed, and this was calculated from the diets (raw materials bought in) and how much phosphorus actually comes into the supply chain. They used calculated tables for what is inherently held in the product and then ultimately, what gets excreted out of the bird. Collecting and testing excretion samples were used to check the calculations were correct.
29. John discussed some top-level numbers – they produce about 160,000 tonnes of poultry manure and produce about 800 tonnes of phosphorus out of the supply chain. John said interestingly, the RePhOKUs report stated that it was about 250,000 tonnes of phosphorus for all poultry and 6100 tonnes for all livestock. John said Avara have shared all their data with Lancaster University and they have now come back and agreed with their numbers. John discussed the initial tables and the discrepancies in using outdated data. It is important to have good data across the board and it must be up to date.
30. John explained what happens to the poultry manure being produced; some of it is used by the farmers on their own land, some is sold by the farmers to other farmers, some is sold outside the catchment, some is used or sold into AD plants, and some is used in on farm litter burners which are there to produce heat or power. John reminded the group that broiler farms have birds that remain in houses, so there is no direct contact between the bird and the land (or river) until you take the manure out. It is also a dry manure and is very easily transportable (e.g., load onto lorries and take it somewhere else). Free range on the other hand, has the potential for run off from the range areas.

31. Last year, Avara made a public statement that as a business, they would take accountability for the phosphate in their supply chain. Avara would also mitigate the phosphate so that they were not being either a direct or indirect contributor to potential pollution to the river. By January 2025, Avara manure would either go to a farmer who produces it themselves and use it on their own land or through their own AD plant, but it would have to be subject to a strict nutrient and soil management plan. Avara is also working on finding a third-party verification process. Avara will continue on those farms that use litter burners (because it burns to ash) as long as the ash leaves the catchment area. Any other manure that was surplus to this would go to one of two enhanced AD plants which are yet to be built. In the short term, Avara will export more out of the catchment area until such times as those plants do or don't get built. John discussed the enhanced AD process and some of the challenges involved.
32. John provided a brief update on the progress of actioning the plan. To date, about 30% of muck is now going out of the catchment and that will increase over time.
33. John suggested that the nub of the problem is not about how many birds or animals you have, it is what happens to the manure. Every farmer makes a choice about what they put on the land and if poultry manure is used properly, there should not be a problem. John said he has seen very good examples of people using soil testing and nutrient management plans. However, John said he has also seen some pretty poor examples. Everyone has to do their job properly, otherwise we will not reduce the surplus and more importantly be able to start tackling the legacy levels in the land.
34. John mentioned some other challenges such as other possible sources of phosphate, legislation, and resources for better enforcement. John said enforcement has been absolutely woeful over the years, but he can only speak regarding his experience from the English side of the border. John said it is not a criticism of individuals, it is simply a criticism of the level of resource available. John said he is not calling for more legislation but calling for a better level of enforcement. Enforcement is from the EA in England or NRW in Wales, but it could also be enforcement through assurance schemes or through other mechanisms.
35. John said it is time to move away from specific numbers of animals. John suggested every farm needs to do their own input-output calculations. We also need to answer some key questions like what is the gross input-output balance, does the catchment actually have too much manure or capacity in places, if there's too much manure what are we going to do with it or how can we redistribute it?
36. John discussed the differences between various agricultural enterprises and the level of resource available to farmers. John suggested collaboration and technology might help farmers to utilise some of the surplus material.
37. John discussed the carrot and the stick approaches and mentioned that good guidance, practical support, financial support and better enforcement and penalties when it is not done properly, is needed. Voluntary schemes will not work because there is always an 'opt out' available, we have got to really enforce the schemes. This makes it fair to everybody and provides a better level of protection to the environment and rivers.
38. John said it has been a frustrating journey for Avara, but they are the only company that has put their head above the parapet. This is a complex issue, and it is not just

about agriculture. However, agriculture is clearly a player, and we are all going to have to do something if we are going to achieve the objectives that we set out to do.

39. There is more initiative in Herefordshire and the good examples are starting to come through. The top quartile businesses are rarely a problem because they are generally doing things properly. However, it is the bottom quartile businesses that are usually a big problem and somehow, we need to address that.
40. At a gross level, we need to understand the input/output for the catchment area and also do that at a farm business level as well. It's not that difficult, but it will take a bit of time. John suggested every farm should carry out soil testing and have a nutrient plan, however, this involves a cost so perhaps there needs to be some support for that.
41. John mentioned that the Northern Ireland Government is going to pick up the bill for soil testing every single field in Northern Ireland.
42. John said Avara have taken a pretty firm view with the farmers in their supply chain because they are able to do that. Avara have acknowledged that the farmers won't all be happy about it, but they don't expect their farmers to lose any income as a consequence of what they are trying to do. Avara will be managing it a lot tighter than in the past.
43. Rhys thanked John for his update and discussing the challenges openly. It is good to hear about some of the work Avara are doing, particularly the idea of taking accountability for phosphates in the supply chain.
44. Creighton Harvey introduced himself to John. Creighton acknowledged that John had prepared very well for talking to this group and he had already answered many of the questions that Creighton would have asked. Creighton recalled that Avara has 120 farms in total within the catchment and 100 of which are in Herefordshire and asked how many are actually in Wales. John said the remaining 20 are in Wales. Those 120 farms are only the farms in the catchment area, Avara have got farms elsewhere around England as well. Creighton said the 120 farms are the farms that would affect the Wye (e.g., the river is cross border) and asked if Avara have any plans to expand in Wales? John said no, Avara is actually reducing our numbers a little bit. John discussed the impact on a local and community level from employment, producing good quality food, feeding people, the outputs, and potential pollutions. Creighton asked how Avara manage or monitor farms which are performing badly. John said Avara have a contract with all the farms and have a level of control as a result. Avara would like to have a third-party verifiable soil nutrient management which is inspected and checked every year.
45. Ieuan said it was good to hear John's comments about the need for soil testing and monitoring because that is a data evidence gap which exists within the whole agricultural industry.
46. Einir Williams, Farming Connect said it was really good to hear about the pioneering steps Avara have taken as a company. Farming Connect have always had poultry farms as part of our demonstration network. Einir asked if Avara have done work on carbon foot printing. John said yes, Avara started looking at carbon foot printing two years ago and said that over a three-year period we would footprint all our farms that we have and then do it on an annual basis. As a business, Avara have done an end-to-end carbon footprint and we are carbon foot printing on the farms. Avara have selected

one tool so that it can be compared like for like across the farms. It demonstrates that the biggest carbon footprint is the feed element and as we produce our own food, we have built that into our nutritional package as well.

47. David Ball recalled that currently about 30% of the poultry manure is going out of the catchment, but by 2025 Avara want the farmers to keep the manure on their own land. John clarified that 30% less manure is going to land in the catchment area now either because it's been exported, or some is burnt in litter burners. Avara wants quite a strict control over this, so the farmers who produce manure and have their own land can use enough manure that the soil nutrient management plan allows them to use and then anything above that has to go off that farm. The balance will have to leave that farm but rather than it going to the farmer next door, it will go to a nominated supply.
48. David asked when it comes to processing manure through an AD plant, is the phosphate in particular still present in the digestate (e.g., the digestate is still an output). John said yes, digestate in that crude form is no different and needs to be controlled in the same way within that nutrient plan. The new AD plants actually take that digestate and process it further so no digestate comes out of it.
49. Bernard thanked John for raising questions about the data for the contribution of the agricultural industry in the phosphate debate. Bernard mentioned that in Wales, we are on the journey of a phosphate summit with various stakeholders and there is a group being set up to look at nutrient trading and nutrient offsetting. Bernard recalled the figures John gave which suggested much less phosphorus is coming from agriculture. Bernard mentioned a proposed trial being explored by the new trading and offsetting group in the Usk catchment with Welsh Water and housing developers to look at the source of the phosphate and to use the agricultural sector to offset the phosphate contributions from the water authorities and the developers. However, given that John said there's less phosphate coming from agriculture then surely that means that the agricultural sector's ability to act as an offset for other groups is affected. John said he gets a bit nervous about offsetting because we've got reduce, not give the problem to somebody else. John suggested that farmers work out their own input/output numbers. We all have to come up with innovative solutions to deal with the problem.
50. Ieuan asked if he could contact John and invite him to a future Agricultural Technical Group meeting which is focused on the phosphate issue. John agreed.
51. Rhys thanked John joining the meeting and said the group would be keen to hear about any future developments regarding the in-house research undertaken by Avara.

## Item 7. Any other business

52. Dennis asked Matthew Walters, Welsh Government about the Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for Tenanted Land document. Matthew said the FAQ document has been published on the Welsh Government website for a while - [Welsh Government: The Water Resources \(Control of Agricultural Pollution\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2021 Tenanted Land - Frequently Asked Questions](#).

Dennis mentioned that Spencer Conlon, Welsh Government had a programme of events going forward to make farmers aware of the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations. One of these events was going to be an on-farm meeting specifically for



tenants Dennis asked if anything has progressed with that. Matthew said the events were discussed with Farming Connect particularly around how the programme developed. Regarding a specific on farm event, this can possibly be looked at again, but it would probably be more focused on infrastructure. Matthew suggested he could pick this up with Einir and Farming Connect to see if or how that might work particularly with the newly assigned Farming Connect demonstration sites. The majority of the delivery has been done through Farming Connect events.

53. The next WLMF Sub Group meeting will be held in person on Monday 19th June 2023. Dwr Cymru Welsh Water have organised for the Beacons Water Group farmers to host a site visit for the group. Further details will be provided in due course.

54. No other business was raised.