

Rother Valley Farmers Group (RVFG)

First Annual Report: 1st January 2018 to 31st March 2019



Photo Ref: Moor Farm, Petworth, M. Chandler (Farmer & RVFG Member) 2018

1 Purpose of report

This is the first annual report for the Rother Valley Farmers Group (RVFG) produced for group members, its project team and Natural England. It is a requirement of the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund¹ (CSFF) grant to produce an annual report, summarising the group's activities from April 2018 to March 2019, and the environmental outcomes arising from them. The CSFF commenced on the 1st January 2018 so this report stretches from this date to the 31st March 2019, which includes the launch and formal establishment of the group. The overall aim of the CSFF is to support people and organisations that bring farmers and land managers together to improve the local natural environment at a landscape scale.

2 Background

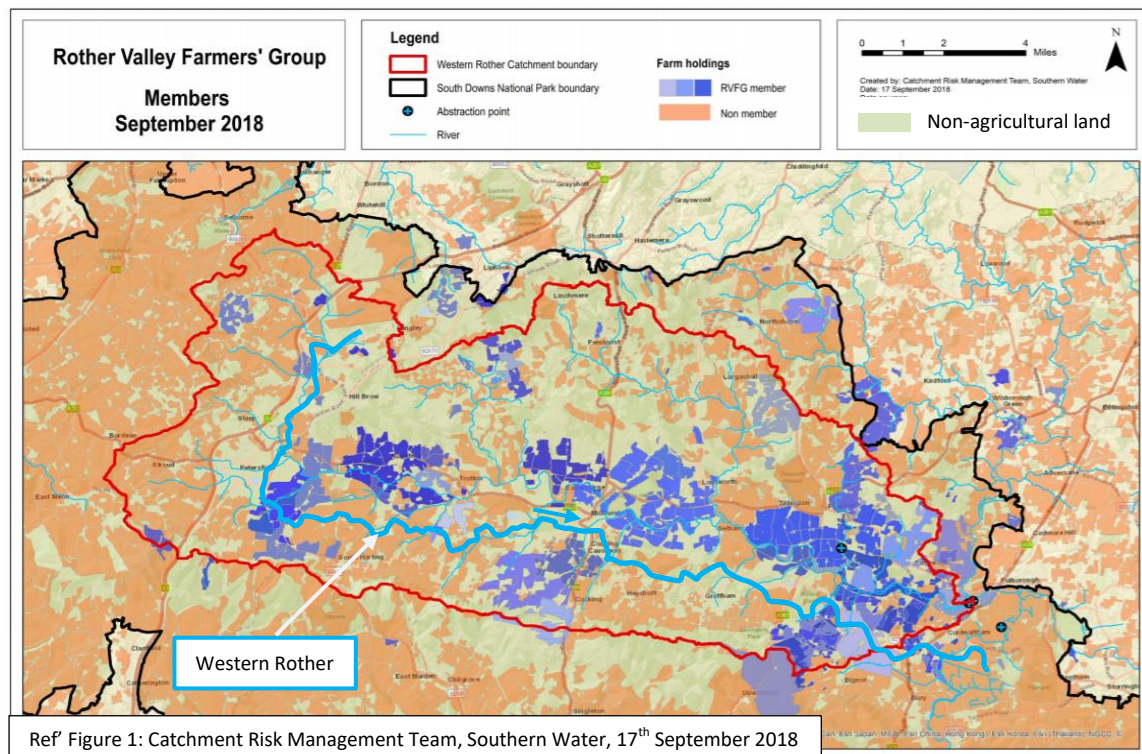
The RVFG is managed by the Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT) which was successful in its second application for CSFF funding in November 2017. The farm group is managed via two experienced Co-Facilitators, Mrs. Ses Wright and Mr. Colin Hedley, ably supported by our Administrator, Mrs. Tracy Thurlow and two key Trustees of the ARRT, Mr. John Archer who worked for many years as a regional advisor for the National Farmers Union and Mr. Richard Chandler, an experienced and much respected farmer within the catchment. The ARRT has been keen to establish a cluster farm along the Western Rother as it encapsulates many of the objectives of the Trust's work, delivering environmental improvements on a river catchment scale similar in many respects to the landscape scale objectives behind the cluster farm initiative. The ecological status of the Western Rother is often a useful barometer of the environmental status of the surrounding land and vice versa.

The CSFF funding for the RVFG runs until the 31st March 2021 with the aspiration for the Group to continue well beyond this point. There is a growing core of enthusiastic RVFG members who are keen to support and develop the group for the longer term. This is encouraging to see given the considerable size of the Western Rother catchment² which has been used as the aerial basis for the RVFG, and wide diversity of its members, from relatively small landowner-farmers to large commercial farm operations and several landed estates. There is significant sub-contracting of farm work within the Group's catchment area. We also recognise the need to deliver our CSFF agreement milestones and objectives and welcome joining and working alongside the other five funded cluster farms located within the South Downs National Park (SDNP). More than 70% of farmland within the Park is now within a farm group and two-thirds of farms within the Park are under some form of agri-environment scheme. This sets a promising context for the overall aim of testing whether environmental outcomes delivered through multi-farm landscape-scale interventions achieved via partnership working can be greater than those realised from individual farms working in isolation.

3 Group Structure

At the beginning of the CSFF grant period, from the 1st January 2018, the RVFG consisted of thirty-one members, managing 8362 ha of farmland between them. Since then the group has grown to thirty-seven members directly managing 9492 ha (23,445 acres, as of April'2019). The main (nominal) boundary adopted for the RVFG is the Western Rother's river catchment, as defined by the Environment Agency (EA). This means that all RVFG member farms operate within the same watershed area, which will aid environmental planning at the landscape scale. A relatively small number of RVFG members have land that extends beyond this boundary, with the majority of all members' farmland within the SDNP area, as shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: RVFG Membership (Sept' 2018) with SDNP and W. Rother Catchment Boundaries



In the longer term we think it is desirable and achievable to increase RVFG membership in excess of 80-90% of the farmland within the Western Rother catchment boundary. If such a large farmers' group is to operate effectively with good group dynamics some careful thought may need to be

directed toward how best to practically manage the group to ensure that all areas and members feel sufficiently 'local' and fully engaged. The following section outline the key meetings, actions and outcomes of the RVFG over the previous year.

4 Key RVFG Activities, Meetings and Outcomes: 1st January 2018 – 31st March 2019

(i) RVFG Launch Event: The RVFG was formally launched at a meeting held on the 28th March 2018 at Cowdray Hall, Midhurst. A good number of RVFG farm members attended the event, in addition to supportive partnership organisations and individuals including the SDNP, Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF), Southern Water, agronomists and land-agents. It was good to see interested farmers getting together and keen to work with wider partners in search of nature conservation benefits, sustainable farming and what this might mean for their enterprises in the future. It was at this event that farmers first agreed via an open vote to encourage all RVFG members to stop using Metaldehyde (by signing a voluntary pledge) as soon as practically possible, with Southern Water keen to expand their financial compensation scheme to RVFG members. This was in advance of the UK Government's later announcement (19th December 2018) to ban the outdoor use of Metaldehyde from Spring 2020.

(ii) RVFG Metaldehyde-Free & Wildlife Targets Meeting: 4th July 2018:

A farmer event entitled 'RVFG Members Metaldehyde-Free by 2021' was held at Moor Farm, Petworth on the 4th July '18 supported by Southern Water and CSF. The basic format of a financial compensation scheme with a concise (1 A4 page max') application form was decided upon. A range of wildlife targets were also introduced to RVFG members. Barn Owl, Rare Uncommon Plants (Common Fumitory, Corn Marigold and Cornflower), Lapwing, Yellowhammer and River Invertebrates (8 key species) were agreed in principle to be targets that member's would like to champion across their farms.

(iii) Series of Summer Meetings with Southern Water for Metaldehyde-Free RVFG Initiative:

Several meetings were held with RVFG members, Southern Water and CSF over the summer months to ensure that by mid-August 2018 the 'metaldehyde-free pledge' and associated compensation forms were ready to be circulated to RVFG members before new orders for pesticides were likely to be placed for the following year.

(iv) Improved mapped knowledge of the farmed landscape meeting(s):

In early Sept'2018 a meeting was held with RVFG members, Southern Water and CSF to better understand how the majority of land within the Western Rother catchment is currently farmed, in terms of who farms what land, where, when and how. This information has been mapped and recorded with further work on-going.

(v) Display tent at the local Petworth & District Agricultural Society Annual Ploughing Match:

On Saturday the 22nd September 2018 the RVFG teamed up with the CSF officers to run a display tent at the local annual ploughing match to help encourage engagement. This was the first time that 'outside' organisations had been invited by the local farming community. The RVFG has been asked if they would like to attend again in 2019.

(vi) Winter Farm Walk for Rother Valley Parish/Civil Councils: 8th January 2019:

All the local Parish and Civil Councils in the Western Rother catchment that have RVFG members within their boundaries were invited to a winter farm walk in early January 2019. The event was concluded to be a real success with very positive feedback from the attendees. Particular thanks are extended to Phil and Liz Andreozzi of Kilsham Farm, located on the banks of the Western Rother near Petworth, for kindly hosting this event, especially just prior to the lambing season which commenced mid-January. The farm walk involved looking at how river invertebrates are surveyed and how they act as key indicators of a river's ecological health and that of the wider area. Fundamental aspects

involved in running Kilsham Farm were described to the group, including the farm's management of natural highly erodible light sandy soils and the risk of field runoff that can result in excess sedimentation of local rivers. Figure 2 (below) shows the group of hardy parish councillors and RVFG project team.

Figure 2: RVFG Parish Council Winter Walk Group Photograph



Photo Ref: 8th January 2019, Kilsham Farm, Near Petworth: RVFG Winter Walk

(vii) Tour of Southern Water's Hardham Water Treatment Works: 20th February 2019:

A detailed tour of Southern Water's Hardham Water Treatment Works was delivered for RVFG members on the 20th February 2019. A good number of farmers attended, with small group tours organised that covered the whole water treatment process, from initial river abstraction through to the point where cleaned water enters the mains water grid. Problems such as excess sediment in the abstracted river water which can block filters and pumps as well as containing potentially hazardous contaminants (*e.g.* persistent pesticide residues) which are costly to extract were discussed. These are issues that are linked to 'upstream' agricultural activities. Figure 3 (below) shows a group of RVFG members at the Hardham Works; a silo of river sediment extracted from treated water; and the continual removal of sediment from the treatment works via large lorries.

Figure 3: RVFG Tours of the Hardham Works, Silo's of Sediment, and Removal Off-Site



Photo Ref: S. Wright, Hardham Works, 20th Feb' 2019

5 RVFG Steering Group

A steering group has been established to help plan the delivery of the RVFG's key aims and objectives. The steering group comprises RVFG members and facilitators, with input from Southern Water's Catchment Strategy team and CSF officers as needed.

6 RVFG Liaison Group

A RVFG Liaison Group has been established with the first meeting held on the 21st January 2019. The Liaison Group will act as a hub to share information, best practice and encourage co-operation across different sectors to help Rother Valley farmers work together for the benefit of wildlife at a landscape scale. Members include the Environment Agency, National Farmers Union, Forestry Commission, Sussex Wildlife Trust and universities with research interests in the Rother valley. The group will meet twice a year.

7 RVFG Operational Plan

The RVFG's Operational Plan sets priority aims for landscape connections, soil and water, rivers, priority species/habitats and community engagement/partnerships, many aspects of which have been addressed in the various events delivered by and for the members of the RVFG, as summarised in Section 4. This section outlines plans that are in progress to further fulfil the aims and objectives of the RVFG's Operational Plan.

Landscape-Scale Connections: Improved digital mapping of the RVFG area is needed to deliver landscape-scale conservation of the farmed environment. The ARRT has invested in GIS software and training to help progress this capability in addition to discussions with the SDNP, The Land App (TLA) and Southern Water to explore the most effective way priority habitats/species can be mapped, enhanced with our own local knowledge, and turned into effective multi-farm conservation planning objectives to be discussed and owned by RVFG members. All of our partnership organisations (CSF, SDNP and Southern Water) use different digital mapping systems that cannot be easily shared, not least because of the GDPR (general data protection) regulations. This has resulted in the RVFG needing its own digital farm mapping data in order to be able to fulfil its potential. The SDNP is keen to be involved in this digital mapping exercise as the data should help deliver wider complementary projects, such as their involvement in the Kent and Sussex Bee-Lines project which enhances land management across wide corridors to aid pollinator species. Both the SDNP and Southern Water have kindly provided digital maps of the RVFG area to aid our project planning in the past, which is very much appreciated. We are looking to secure additional funds to help deliver this critical aspect of the RVFG work.

Target Species: RVFG target species have been agreed for Lapwing, Barn Owl, Yellowhammer, Uncommon Arable Plants (Common Fumitory, Corn Marigold and Cornflower) and a group of 8 key river invertebrates. These target species will help raise awareness of priority species (e.g. farmland birds, pollinators, plant biodiversity, insects and invertebrates) with training events and supporting material (e.g. identification guides). Training is currently being planned into the next facilitation year, with a rare arable plants training day for RVFG members in early July 2019. Similarly, training for in-river invertebrates for the RVFG area is being progressed through partnership links with the SDNP and ARRT.

Soil and Water: The priority given to soil and water objectives reflects the natural highly erodible soils along the Western Rother. The onus is on farming to increase the uptake of measures to counter soil

erosion risk and improve soil health, for example, with objectives to increase organic matter such that fields can hold on to water for longer during droughts as well as being more resilient to erosion. These aims will improve crop yields and farm profits in the long term, indeed many RVFG farmers are already investing in measures and actions to improve their most valuable resource. Cover crop trials and meetings have been attended by co-facilitators sharing information to RVFG members on what techniques and outcomes appear to work best to maximise soil (and crop) health and reduce the risk of diffuse pollution. This includes the successful trial of inter-row sowing of cover crops into maize and winter wheat fields which has been found to significantly decrease soil runoff problems in addition to significantly improving soil health. RVFG members also attended a recent ARRT/CSF workshop aimed at reducing soil-loss with practical in-field trials of methods to trap field runoff (April 2019).

8 RVFG Promotion & Communications

Promotion of the RVFG has chiefly been through the SDNP, ARRT, Southern Water and CSF, with Natural England, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and the Arun & Western Streams Catchment Partnership, of which ARRT is the host organisation, all playing important roles. The SDNP has a dedicated Cluster Farm officer who is progressing landscape-scale conservation plans across all six funded farmer groups and keen to trial the Government's proposed Environmental Land Management (ELMS) plans through the Park's cluster farms.

The SDNP kindly provided social media training for all local farm facilitators in February 2018 and have a member of staff who can receive photo's and brief stories from cluster farmers and use social media to distribute via a Twitter account. The Park also has a dedicated part of their website assigned to farm clusters which is currently being revised and upgraded. This improvement should result in allowing individual Clusters to edit their own pages, highlight action for target species, promote and report back on events, and promote the other services offered by members, e.g., food and drink, wedding venues and holiday accommodation.

We are keen to replicate the Near Field Communication (NFC) project successfully delivered by the neighbouring (and more established) Arun to Adur cluster farm in 2018, which involves visitors walking along registered footpaths on cluster farmland being able to use their smart phone to access short videos (via a coded App sign affixed to a fence post) about who farms the land they are walking upon, what crops/animals are being managed and what environmental aspects are being championed. The video also links to the SDNP's cluster farm website, with different cluster farms having their own page so that interested people can find out more about a Cluster if they wish.

The RVFG are keen to grow our communications potential in order to inform the local community, our partner organisations and further afield of our aspirations and achievements.

9 Countryside Stewardship

There is varied uptake of Countryside Stewardship (CS) across RVFG members. Our records indicate there are 11 Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements currently in operation, one of which finishes in late 2019, three in 2020, one in 2021 and three agreements end in both years' 2022 and in 2023 consecutively. Our records also show that a further 10 RVFG members' CS HLS agreements have lapsed since 2016. Recent discussions with RVFG farmers indicate that quite a few members are considering applying to CS again in the future. We envisage that as our mapped GIS database of RVFG members improves the monitoring of CS agreements can be tracked more effectively and the scope for delivering CS Priorities (Species/Habitats) at a landscape scale assessed. We are looking into the

merits of convening a meeting with RVFG members and Natural England in the winter to update potentially interested farmers on the prospects for applying for CS schemes in the next coming year.

10 Other Funding Sources

We have held many positive and constructive meetings with Southern Water over the year and feel that our relationship is going from strength to strength. They helped fund the additional work invested into establishing the RVFG Metaldehyde-Free pledge and compensation payment system as this was beyond that available in the CSFF budget which is largely set to deliver agreed objectives and outputs for Natural England. It also looks like Southern Water are potentially interested in providing funding for a soil monitoring project proposal submitted to them by the RVFG (and ARRT) which would cover four fields on each of four farms. Such a project will benefit all local farmers with cultivated land through raising awareness about the likely health of soils on similar soil types and rotations and how these can be improved, leading to increased yields, potentially lower costs and a lower risk of soil erosion with improved water resilience.

Thanks

The RVFG would not be possible without the enthusiasm, direction and participation of each of the group members. Similarly, the running of the project itself relies on the support and energy of Colin Hedley, Ses Wright, Tracy Thurlow, Richard Chandler (ARRT Trustee and RVFG Member) & John Archer (ARRT Trustee), with particular thanks to Steering Group farmer members, Lee Dallyn and James Allen. Our wider partners in Southern Water; Kate Rice, Fiona Pearce and Claire Neale; and multiple people within the SDNP and CSF officers are also very much valued. Credit and thanks are due to each and all of these.

Drafted by Ses Wright with support and advice from Tracy Thurlow and Colin Hedley, 2nd July 2019

Footnotes:

¹ The CSFF receives funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

² The size of the Western Rother Catchment, which includes all its tributaries and surrounding land that drains into the main river, is 36020 hectares (Environment Agency, Catchment Data Explorer. Website Ref: <https://environment.data.gov.uk/catchment-planning/WaterBody/GB107041012810> (2019)

RVFG Wildlife Target Species: Corn Marigold, Cornflower, Common Fumitory, Lapwing, Yellowhammer, Barn Owl, Mayfly

