

Organic grassland extension in Wales – experiences

Heather McCalman, Bryan Evans, Charlie Morgan, Chris Duller, Deborah Courtney
IGER, Plas Gogerddan, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3EB, UK.

ABSTRACT

Grassland is the backbone of Welsh agriculture and agri-environmental policy incentives are encouraging organic farming across Wales. The Grassland Technology Transfer Project at IGER has offered a dedicated organic grassland extension service within Wales. In this paper the main activities and experience gained from working with farmers, scientists and other industry groups on grassland related issues are described. The role of the IGER organic dairy unit in the extension process is explored. Conversion to organic farming and interest in greater 'self sufficiency' by organic farmers in response to changes in organic standards and derogations required by 2003 have prompted enquiries on particular key issues which include crop rotations, cropping, reseeding and grassland improvement options.

Keywords: organic farming; grassland extension, focus farm groups, farmer participation

INTRODUCTION

IGER has been involved in an extension programme in Wales since 1999. Its aim has been to facilitate a more rapid adoption of research findings across the whole range of its grassland and environmental programmes. Crop rotations are limited in much of Wales, an area where grassland predominates, but adapting systems to meet the challenges of organic standards are an important part of extension activity. The project has incorporated traditional agricultural extension practices with new concepts like the Focus Farm Group network with the aim of bridging the gap between organic farmers and researchers and improving sustainability and profitability in organic farming. The level of interest in organic farming in Wales is reflected by the fact that 32% of farmers on the grassland technology database have an interest in the organic programme.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

IGER increasingly recognises the need for feedback to its research activities and is keen to improve the two-way flow of information between producers and researchers. Direct and interactive contact with both individual farmers and with farmer groups is used. The IGER programme has placed emphasis on the group approach but retains more traditional methods including farm visits, fact sheets and newsletters. Its role will be increasingly coordinated by Organic Centre Wales as integral part of support available to farmers interested in organic farming.

Focus Farm Groups

A network of Organic Focus Farm Groups was established, based on the successful New Zealand Monitor Farm Programme (Sheath *et al.*, 1999). The groups were set up from 'scratch' by contacts derived from the IGER organic grassland database, the Cambrian Organic Group and from those of initial group members. The group members selected the 'host' farmer and set the agenda for subsequent meetings and for 'projects' to be examined. The groups comprise the Focus Farmer and family, local farmers and key people that support the business (e.g. local vet, farm accountant) and thus potentially include a mix of age groups and backgrounds. Group members need common ground (e.g. farming system and locality) and to programme regular meetings within the working day or evening. Following an audit of the grassland, stock and business, it is the groups' role to set Focus Farm targets, both physical and financial, and decide the way forward. In this programme the farmers take the lead, aiming improvements at *their objectives* so they can use and compare their own experiences and performance to assess opportunity and benchmark progress. By maximising farmer participation the approach provides a strong base for feedback into research.

Focus Farms were not selected to demonstrate 'best practice' techniques, but to work with farmer groups to identify where research and new technology could improve grassland management. Taking demonstrations away from Institutional farms helps remove farmer scepticism associated with non-commercial units and has broadened the audience, reaching a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. The groups encourage participation by the family, not just the 'farmer' so the scope of participation widens to family objectives as well as business needs. Organic farmers are already committed to change as part of the conversion process, sharing this experience enables increased confidence and the opportunity to learn from each other.

IGER extension staff highlight where grassland initiatives could facilitate improvements. These must be financially realistic, feasible and appropriate to other members' farms. Financial appraisal of proposed improvements should be encouraged and simple and rapid methods of financial benchmarking are needed so they could be used by farmers as everyday tools.

Results from Focus Farm Groups

Two organic Focus Farm groups have been established, centred on a beef and sheep farm and on a dairy and cropping farm. Both groups include members who are established organic farmers, as well as those just starting conversion. Despite significant differences in the enterprise mix amongst the members of the two groups, they highlighted similar topics to explore. These included: (1) soil structure and fertility management (aeration, drainage, inputs), (2) manure and slurry management and nutrient budgets, (3) grassland related standards issues (livestock tack, organic seed), interpretations and input to standards development, (4) homegrown feed, nutrition and feed balancing (protein and energy crops), (5)

rotation planning and systems - and role of grassland, clover and other legumes, (6) introducing and maintaining clover rich swards, (7) arable silage/whole cropping, (8) weed control, (9) a visit to the IGER organic dairy unit 'Ty Gwyn' to meet researchers and (10) visits to members farms. The topics clearly reflect the impending removal of derogations on organic feed and seed and the need to develop more self-sufficient feed strategies from on farm resources.

On the Focus Farms practical field scale grassland projects include the use of red /white clover leys, arable cover crops for undersowing red clover leys and production of organic seed. The Focus Farms will be used as locations for farm walks and open days.

Other Extension Work

More traditional extension activity includes: (1) farm visits covering a wide range of topics from oversowing swards to clover leys in rotation planning; (2) 'Organic Grass Focus', a question and answer bulletin that encourages farmers to ring or write in with questions; (3) the Grassland Enquiry line; (4) 'Farmer friendly' factsheets on popular topics; (5) training events involving group activities on a range of topics often coordinated by local producer groups (Cambrian Organic) or the Organic Centre Wales.

Role of Ty Gwyn (IGER organic dairy)

The organic dairy research unit is split into two herds under different management regimes, one of which, Ty Gwyn A, is aiming for self-sufficiency in feed. Farmers are encouraged to visit Ty Gwyn and are generally raise a range of questions on its management. Popular questions concern the composition of grassland leys, approaches to weed control and use of herb plots. Experience gained at Ty Gwyn is adapted for use on the commercial Focus Farms and has included substituting hybrid for Italian ryegrasses in red clover leys undersown to spring barley. This developing relationship with the Focus Farm groups will enable a more effective use of the research farm – the farmers and the extension staff having a better understanding of each other and their respective needs.

Research – Extension Links

Links between IGER researchers and farmers are being continually developed and include input from scientists at focus farm group meetings and working together on research proposals to incorporate farmers' ideas. Dissemination and application of results are then integral to the research process, i.e. extension becomes part of research. In the shorter term, while this process evolves, the focus farm group enables the use of research outputs to deal with issues identified by the farmer group. Examples in progress include forage diets for organic dairy cows to optimise energy and protein balance, clover management for organic farmers and organic seed production.

SUMMARY

Focus Farm Groups are a useful tool for two-way communication between farmers and researchers and will lead to extension that is integral to research. The Focus Farm Group concept is still being developed; the group activity is a dynamic process, has no blueprint and will evolve for the needs of Welsh organic farmers. Using a group as a base enables a bottom up approach *led* by on-farm challenges. Exchange between farmers is invaluable gives confidence and increases opportunity to widen knowledge. The farmer members of Focus Farm groups were very clear about the objectives of the group and about the topics that they wanted to explore. It was easy to effectively translate these into on farm projects for the group members and experiences shared.

Input from IGER Scientists is welcomed and facilitation of group development is the key to enable the groups to move forward. A dedicated extension service helps to facilitate the two-way dialogue and allows all concerned a forum to develop ideas with practical relevance to organic farming in Wales. In order for extension to retain the scope to take messages out to a wider audience it is also necessary to incorporate many other extension methods in an extension programme including factsheets, open days, newsletters and encouragement of others to join the process.

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