

Summary Minutes of the Soil Association AGM

Held digitally on Wednesday, 27 September 2023

Staff present: Helen Browning (CEO), Nicola Spencer (Group Resources Director), James Cashmore (Charity Managing Director), Louisa Pharaoh (Director of Fundraising), Ray Clark (Head of Supporter Development), Ben Raskin (Head of Horticulture and Agroforestry), Grace Dennis (Local Programme Manager, Healthy and Sustainable Diets)

Trustee: Martin Nye (Chair)

Welcome and Introduction – Martin Nye, Chair of Trustees

Martin welcomed everyone to the AGM and provided an overview of the agenda. He explained that the AGM is being held digitally to allow more people to access the event and explained how the digital AGM would work.

Finance and Governance – Nicola Spencer, Group Resources Director

During the charity finance report, Nicola Spencer, the Group Resources Director, provided an overview of the organisation's financial situation. She explained that the group structure consists of the charity arm of the Soil Association, Soil Association Certification, Soil Exchange, and SA Sales and Services. All profits from these businesses are donated annually to the charity, supporting its work. The Soil Association is the sole member of another registered charity, Soil Association Land Trust, which owns several farms.

The annual accounts, available on the website, cover the entire group's performance, including the Land Trust, but they also provide some information on the charity individually. Last year, the charity's unrestricted income was £3.6 million, a 15% decrease from the previous year's £4.2 million. The decrease was mainly due to the reduction in the donation from Soil Association Certification, which was unusually high the previous year. The charity made a surplus in the previous year, and they planned to spend more last year, investing in new business development and fundraising. Expenditure increased in those areas, but due to a challenging environment, they had to put some planned investment on hold. Overall, this resulted in net expenditure of £800,000. The charity also manages restricted funds, which are crucial for specific projects aligned with donors' wishes. Last year, there was a significant deficit as they spent down project funds received earlier. The charity maintains reserves to ensure financial stability, aiming for a free reserve between £850,000 and £1.7 million, ending the year with £993,000 in free reserves.

While the Soil Association began the current financial year in a solid position and many income streams are growing, the organisation faces challenges due to rising costs. The charity must carefully manage these dynamics in a fast-changing environment to ensure sustainability and impact.

The board of trustees, including the Chair Martin and 12 volunteers with diverse expertise, is responsible for planning and adapting to these challenges. Four new trustees—Tony, Sabine, Lauren, and Richard—have recently joined the board.

Organic September and nature-friendly alternatives to synthetic fertiliser at Eastbrook Farm – Helen Browning, Chief Executive

Helen Browning commenced the session by discussing the impact of the Soil Association over the past year. Notable highlights included collaboration with the RSPB to shape the future of farming and nature. The previous year saw the hosting of a session at the Oxford Farming Conference where various organizations unanimously supported a consensus on farming and nature.

The 10th-anniversary celebration of Innovative Farmers was a significant event featuring Prince Charles III. A total of £620,000 worth of funding was distributed, underscoring the substantial impact of small grants. The Soil Association launched over 150 field labs across the UK, involving approximately 750 farmers, along with over 40 research institutions. The results of these trials were shared with tens of thousands of farmers annually through "Farming Today." Gratitude was extended to the Prince of Wales Charitable Foundation for its consistent support.

Another highlight was the establishment and growth of the Soil Association Exchange, measuring environmental, social, and welfare outcomes on over 400 farms, covering 119,000 hectares, constituting 1% of the UK's farmed area. A free-to-use service and a dedicated app were launched for farmers to access and utilize their data. The Soil Association is now certifying over 26 million hectares of forests in 60 countries while training the next generation of forest managers globally.

The organization is championing continuous cover forestry and advocating for a more natural regeneration approach with mixed species diversity in forests. Efforts to support farmers in managing woodlands on their farms and unlocking commercial opportunities while enhancing nature and social outcomes were highlighted. The UK's first agroforestry show was hosted at Helen Browning's farm near Swindon.

A special focus was placed on Organic September, celebrating 50 years of certification and emphasizing the issue of synthetic nitrogen overuse. This overlooked problem contributes to excessive reactive nitrogen in the atmosphere, originating from synthetic sources. Organic farming's careful approach to nitrogen use makes it a key player in addressing this issue. The organization is urging the government to set targets to reduce synthetic nitrogen usage, emphasizing the benefits of transitioning to more sustainable practices.

Finally, Helen emphasized that these initiatives are being implemented on all farms associated with the Soil Association, including Eastbrook Farm. The presentation included images illustrating the farm's methods, such as using lagoons to manage nitrogen and cultivating healthy, productive crops. The aim is to inspire more farmers to transition away from synthetic nitrogen and toward more sustainable farming practices.

Helen concluded her presentation and handed over to Ben to delve into agroforestry at Eastbrook Farm and other locations.

An overview of the agroforestry initiatives at Eastbrook and Woodoaks – Ben Raskin, Head of Horticulture and Agroforestry

Ben provided a brief history of integrating trees into farming and explained the concept of agroforestry. Agroforestry was described as a method to increase agricultural yield without requiring additional land. It offers numerous benefits, including improved animal welfare.

Even during winter, the presence of trees can warm the ground and create a more hospitable environment for animals. Most farmed animals originate from woodlands or woodland edges and tend to thrive in such environments. Trees offer shade, reducing the need for animals to expend energy regulating their body temperature, thereby potentially increasing weight gain and milk production.

Ben emphasized the advantages of agroforestry for soil health. Trees help capture and store carbon and organic matter in the soil. The presence of trees can increase organic matter and enhance fungal populations in the soil, which is crucial for soil health. A balanced ratio of fungi to bacteria in the soil is beneficial, and trees play a role in achieving this balance.

Ben stressed the importance of agroforestry in providing protection against extreme weather conditions like heat, rain, and wind.

Trees offer a form of business resilience, as diversified enterprises are less likely to fail.

Climate resilience is a significant factor for consideration in agroforestry practices.

Ben highlighted various environmental benefits associated with agroforestry, including the absorption of nitrogen and improvement of water quality. Trees assist in managing extreme rainfall events, reducing the risk of flooding in lower areas over time. Agroforestry can help capture ammonia, reducing pollution around areas like buildings and poultry farms. Sequestering carbon is another environmental benefit of agroforestry.

Ben discussed potential approaches to implementing agroforestry, such as transforming poorly managed hedges into productive ones. Existing woodlands can be used for livestock grazing, provided careful management is in place. Partially shaded areas can support both tree growth and grasses, clovers, and other beneficial species. The presentation also highlighted an agroforestry event with significant farmer interest and emphasized the importance of knowledge-sharing and experimentation.

Eastbrook and Wood Oaks

Ben provided insights into ongoing agroforestry initiatives at Eastbrook and Wood Oaks.

Eastbrook Farm focuses on planting agroforestry systems on 200 acres of heavy clay soil, aiming to be experimental and a demonstration farm.

Wood Oaks Farm, a land trust farm, has initiated habitat restoration and wildlife conservation efforts, as well as the planting of fruit and nut trees.

The presentation highlighted the importance of agroforestry and its numerous benefits, both for farmers and the environment. The ongoing initiatives at Eastbrook and Wood Oaks demonstrate a commitment to experimenting with and promoting sustainable farming practices.

Food for Life Schools – Grace Dennis, Local Programme Manager, Healthy and Sustainable Diets

Grace Dennis introduced herself and presented an overview of the Food for Life programme's work with schools. She discussed the importance of a whole school approach to embedding a good food culture in schools, involving students, catering staff, teaching staff, and the local community. Grace highlighted the positive impact of this approach and showcased a video from a school in Derbyshire that demonstrated the difference the Food for Life program can make.

Q&A – Chaired by James Cashmore

James Cashmore, the charity and enterprise director, expressed his appreciation for the work of Grace and Ben and emphasized the Soil Association's unique role in promoting connections throughout the food system. He opened the Q&A with the first question: **Are organic farming and regenerative farming complementary? Or in competition?**

Helen Browning, the CEO, explained the complementary nature of organic and regenerative farming, highlighting the enthusiasm among farmers for regenerative practices. She also mentioned concerns regarding gene editing in agriculture, emphasizing the need for clear labeling and expressing worries about the government's stance on this issue.

James then answered the next question: **What can people do more to explore the aims of the Soil Association?**

James outlined ways for people to support the Soil Association's work, including getting involved in campaigns, becoming members, donating, or simply choosing organic and sustainable food.

The next question was: **How can we persuade new allotment holders that it isn't necessary to dig deep in order to grow vegetables? The idea being that all that digging really does release carbon back into the atmosphere, doesn't it?**

Ben Raskin explained the benefits of the 'No Dig' technique favoured by Charles Dowding. He explained that when you dig, you disturb the soil life and release carbon so the less of that we can do better. He also explained how to mulch with wood chip to manage weeds and use green manures as a living mulch.

James then asked Grace to answer the next question: **Are there any plans, in schools, to teach children about food provenance and sustainability in the curriculum?**

Grace Dennis addressed the incorporation of food provenance and sustainability into school curricula, emphasizing how the Food for Life program integrates these concepts into various subjects and encourages community partnerships.

James then asked Helen to answer the next question: **What are the applications of the government gene editing act and particularly the sense that they may not potentially be any labelling for consumers in relation to gene editing food?**

Helen Browning discussed the lack of labelling for gene-edited food and expressed concerns about the government's direction in this regard. She encouraged public engagement and advocacy to influence policies related to gene editing.

The next question was: **Are you going to renovate the barn and farm buildings at Woodoaks farm?**

Helen briefly mentioned the development grant received for the renovation of Woodoaks Farm, turning it into a community asset.

The final question was: **What is being done to guard against soil erosion in light of more severe and heavy rains expected in the future?**

Ben Raskin responded by talking about the importance of crop rotation systems and application of organic matter to the soil to protect it. He also talked about using a living mulch and planting trees to provide structure.

James and Helen closed the AGM, ending with a reminder of upcoming events and the importance of engaging with the Soil Association's work and campaigns.