

Knowledge Collation and Dissemination Focus Group
Notes from Planning meeting held at HDRA 11th March 2003

1. Objectives of the Day

This focus group meeting was called to discuss work to be undertaken within the theme “Communication and Access to Knowledge” identified at a stakeholder meeting on the 3rd December 2002. The meeting intended to focus on issues arising with a group of interested farmers and researchers in order to develop a plan for research work.

The specific objectives of the day were to:

- define the group role
- consider the remit of the group and group functioning
- consider the budget allocation
- to discuss dissemination methods
- agree on some practical research and dissemination activities
- agree on how to monitor progress with the activities

Present:

Steve Castle, Adrian Hares, Chris Stockdale (Farmers) Bill Bond (Participant researcher) Gareth Davies, Richard Gunton, Margi Lennartsson, Phil Sumption, Becky Turner (HDRA researchers) David Gibbon, Andrew Mead (Project researchers)

Apologies:

Jean Burke, Roger Unwin, Keith Walby

2. Project Framework

The project framework as envisaged in the original proposal to DEFRA was presented and the resources available for the work outlined. The resources available to the group are important in determining the work that can be done and also important for defining the focus group role. A brief summary of the presentation and discussion is offered below.

Overall aims of the project: “This DEFRA funded project aims to define weed problems together with organic farmers and growers, propose ways of addressing these problems, and then research solutions in order to arrive at the most appropriate for use in organic systems.”

Proposed framework: The basic project framework and initial assumptions made in the application to DEFRA for funding the project are summarised below (more details are available from Becky upon request).

Practical research and dissemination work:

- focus group and stakeholder meetings each year (based on 3 groups up and running)
- annual and perennial weed trials to begin Autumn 2003 and run to Autumn 2006

- on-farm trials 3 per year, on-farm demonstration trials, 3 per year (Years 2-4), on-station trials 1 per year (years 2 and 3) (total for all focus groups)

Project resources: the resources available to the project as a whole were also presented and are summarised below:

- HDRA staffing (1 Senior researcher 20% all years; 1 Researcher 80% yr 1, 50% yrs 2 and 3, 60% yr 4; 1 Research assistant 50% all years; Admin 10% all years)
- Sub-contractor staffing (Statistician 40 days over 4 years, Participatory expert 80 days over 4 years, 4 Allocated researchers' time 70 days over 4 years, Extra research time 85 days over 4 years, Researcher travel expenses to meetings and trials (e.g. for trials 18 visits at a distance of 300 miles)
- Farmers (45 farmers have offered land for trials either farmer or researcher monitored, 40 offered to provide survey type data)
- Computer resources (Laptop, Data projector)
- Set-up costs for meetings (Stakeholder, Focus group meetings, Farm walks)
- Consumables for trials (e.g. equipment, labels etc (up to £2000))
- Budget for extension and dissemination material (Fact sheets, Grower guide, WebPages)

Knowledge Collation and Dissemination Group Budget: the budget available (as stipulated in the original DEFRA contract) was detailed and is very briefly summarised here (details are available from Becky on request). In each year the budget has money for:

- Travel and subsistence for focus groups (Yr 1 £2000, Yr 2 £2060, Yr 3 £2122, Yr 4 £2186)
- Travel to Stakeholder meetings (for speakers, including growers, Yr 1 £700, Yr 2 £721, Yr 3 £743, Yr 4 £765)
- On-farm trials (land occupation, care and maintenance Yr 2 £1648, Yr 3 £1697, Yr 4 £1748)
- On-station trials (land rental, care and maintenance Yr 2 £3433, Yr 3 £3536)
- On-farm demonstration trials (land, care and maintenance Yr2 £1133, Yr 3 £1167, Yr 4 £1202)

There is some flexibility for reallocating funds within (e.g. from research station to on-farm trials) and for other tasks (e.g. for dissemination activities) and between focus groups depending on activities decided on by the group.

3. Role of the Focus Group

Given the proposed project framework the role of the focus group was briefly discussed and as an initial role the group should:

- steer direction of work on the theme of “Knowledge Collation and Dissemination”
- reach a consensus on work to be undertaken over the course of the project
- provide feedback on collation and dissemination activities as well as on trial designs and results
- decide future work programme based on each year's results
- monitor on-going programmes

The role of the group will probably have to be refined over the course of the project and will naturally develop as the work proceeds. The group decided that, in addition to the stakeholder

meeting, we would need to meet twice per year to fulfil the role. It was agreed that a £100 flat fee per meeting (except for any visitors travelling exceptional distances) was adequate compensation for attending these. There was some discussion that adequate accountability practices need to be implemented and a signing in book will be started for each meeting. Accounts will be held by Becky and be available for inspection. A brief review of accounts will be presented to the stakeholders' meeting during each year.

It will be important that members of this group maintain contact with one another and it is envisaged that e-mail will be an important medium for exchange of ideas.

4. Approaches suggested at Stakeholder Day

As a preliminary step in discussing the work plan, ideas suggested at the stakeholder day (December 3rd 2002) were briefly summarised and these are outlined below together with some comments made by those at the meeting.

Context for the Knowledge Group:

- information a common thread to stakeholder day and focus groups
- high value placed on farmer experience
- strong interest in documenting best practice or “effective practices”
- also identification and generation of ideas for new technologies/techniques
- potentially validating anecdotal and other gathered information in later years

Themes arising on the stakeholder day were:

- evaluation and collation of “scientific” knowledge
- evaluation and documentation of best practice – the focus group decided that “effective practices” and “diversity” of practice are better terms.
- documentation of historic trends (and timelines from conversion)
- threshold data, economic criteria for judging “acceptable levels” of weeds

Issues arising from the themes that might be important to take into account are how to do the case studies (farm systems, time lines), making linkages across groups, easy access to case studies and experimental findings, how to collate the data. In the final presentation economic criteria will be important and although exact figures may not be available ‘open’ calculations can help estimate costs in many cases. The economic angle should be considered throughout compilation of the information.

On the stakeholder day (on 3rd December) monitoring forms indicated that farmers rated other farmers and farm walks as the most useful sources of information (experience positive and negative, warts and all!) followed by advisors, farming press, leaflets and books. Technical days were rated as less so. Factors such as these will need to be taken into account when thinking about dissemination programmes. It should be an aim to enhance the former but to also challenge and improve on the latter.

Finally, a number of potential approaches were suggested on the stakeholder day, which included:

- case studies (links with other topic groups...)
- a database of formal knowledge
- documentation of historical practices and trends
- documentation of current effective practice
- web discussion groups
- newsletter (electronic and printed)
- weed management technical handbook

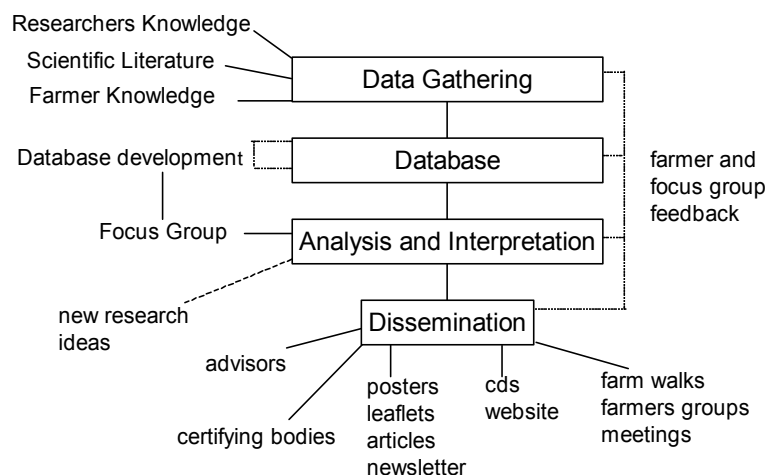
Some general questions were suggested for consideration by the group as the work plan was being formulated including:

- how do we collect information?
- what type of information are we looking for from case studies?
- how do we present and/or disseminate data?
- how do we engage more farmers? Participation....
- how do we encourage interaction between farmers in the project?
- how do we ensure the groups are self sustaining after the end of the project?
- how should we use the website (<http://www.hdra.org.uk/research/forums/index.php>)

5. Group Discussion and Work Plan

The group discussed the issues, and work activities needed to address them, in an open session. The discussions are summarised on the flow chart and in the notes below.

Information Flow Chart for Knowledge Group:



Data Gathering: will be based on researchers' knowledge, farmers' knowledge and scientific literature. For organics quite a lot of data might be in the grey literature. Data gathering will need to be orientated across focus groups, all of which have decided on a case study approach (successes and failures in the case of docks/perennials and understanding farming systems in the case of systems). FEEDBACK will be very important in the whole process in order to adjust data gathering to suit farmer needs, and requirements in terms of identification of new technologies, trialling and dissemination.

MAFF project OF 0152 “Desk study on the control of weeds in organic arable and horticultural production systems” is likely to be the best starting point and a good source of information from which to start the database (with appropriate updating, particularly inclusion of livestock systems).

Case studies are likely to be an important part of data gathering. These will be co-ordinated across groups and involve visiting farms and interviewing farmers. Semi-structured or informal interviews will be used to draw out weed management stories and farmers will be offered a compensatory payment or goodwill gift for their time. Various methods are likely to be useful like discussion of operations calendars, time lines and histories.

Other data gathering methods are likely to include contacting and working with farmer groups where they exist and setting up interactive parts to the website where farmers and others can post information and make comments.

Data gathering will be structured around some focussed themes to capture and maintain interest of participants. Suggested themes for year 1 included Docks (link with docks group), undersowing (links with systems group), grass weeds, timing of operations, and/or equipment.

Database: information is likely to be of various kinds including data on weed biology and weed distribution, information on control methods, anecdotal knowledge and feedback from monitoring and case studies. So there will be two threads: ‘scientific’ and farmer experiential data. Data is likely to be structured in some cases but often unstructured. It will be important to keep clear references and provenance of comments.

Ultimately, database development is likely to need professional input (which could be expensive) and specialist database software. Construction of the database will require different skills to designing the user interface (web pages!). Costs might be reduced by involving universities or other groups who have done or are doing similar work (e.g. Compendium Animal Health and Hortips, Reading University; EMMA (Univ Hertfordshire, IRS); HORIS/MORPH, HRI; Identipest, HDC; WMS; Morley experience etc.).

Ownership of the information and continued maintenance of the database are important considerations beyond the lifetime of the project.

Analysis and Interpretation: feedback from this process will show ‘gaps’ where research might need to be commissioned and what can go on for dissemination. The focus group will be important in this part of the process, which might involve discussion and refinement as the project proceeds.

Dissemination: will have to address the perceived need to quantify ‘acceptable’ levels of weeds, criteria and options for control. Weed ranking and costings will be important. On costings, open calculations rather than overly accurate ones will be acceptable. Dissemination might require professional input along the lines of professional market research people or communications people.

Suggested methods of communication are given on the flow chart above and include CDs, website, posters, leaflets, articles in the press and newsletters. This should include buying a snappier website domain name. We also need to make some links to the site via existing

webpages used by farmers. Certifying bodies (eg Soil Association) are very important sources of advice for organic farmers, so we must get them involved more.

Farmers value interaction with other farmers and contacting and working with existing farmers' groups to disseminate information and get feedback is likely to be important. Producer bodies and advisors need to be drawn into the process. Radio might be useful at some stage. Farmers of course use a range of sources for their information and no one source is going to cover all dissemination needs; therefore the project will have to develop a number of different dissemination materials and pathways.

With web based dissemination the front-end and maintenance is important and should not be underestimated. Farmer feedback/interaction on dissemination methods is crucial throughout the process.

6. Summary

- This group will form an important backbone to the whole project, filtering and analysing information gathered, disseminating it and obtaining feedback from participants.
- An important part of the group work will be to collate information from 'scientific' and 'grey' literature on organic weed control.
- The group will ensure other groups gather appropriate information during case studies and help in this process.
- The group will set up a database for information storage and retrieval
- The group will advise on dissemination of information including web-based methods, leaflets and posters.
- The group will start to try and work through existing farmer groups to achieve some of these aims.

A more detailed action plan for each theme will be formulated in due course and circulated to all three focus groups.

Gareth Davies, Becky Turner, Richard Gunton, Margi Lennartsson
HDRA, 12 March 2003