

Case Study

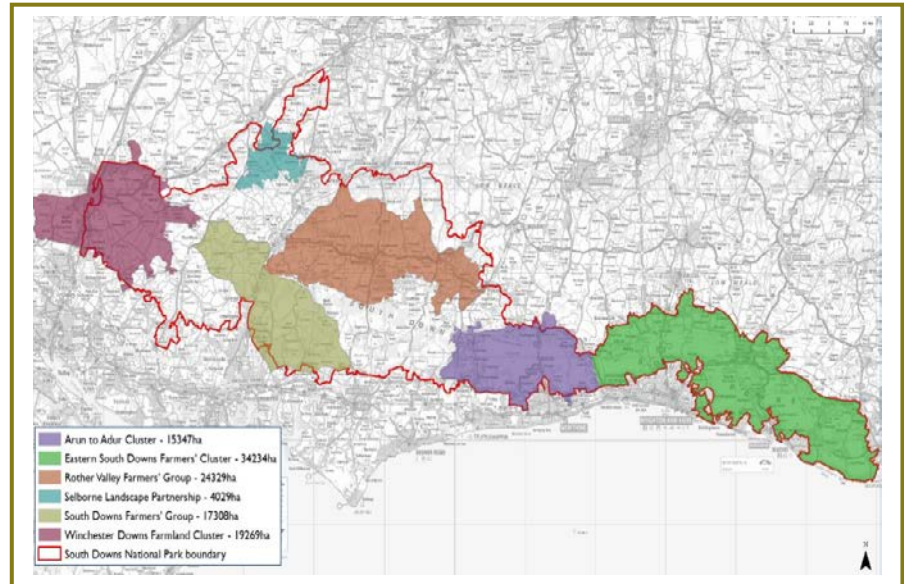
Farm Clusters on the South Downs

Background

In 2010, an independent review of England's wildlife sites entitled 'Making space for nature' was published. Led by Sir John Lawton, the review made recommendations to help achieve a healthy natural environment that would allow plants and animals to thrive. The message was simple - bigger, better, more joined up.

In response to this, the UK Government launched Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs), a network of large-scale initiatives across the landscape to improve ecological connectivity and enhance biodiversity. From 76 applications, twelve were chosen to go forward as pilots. One of these was the South Downs Way Ahead, focussing on connecting areas of chalk grassland along the South Downs Way.

One of the NIA pilots, led by a group of farmers in the Marlborough Downs, showed the benefits to the farmed environment when farmers worked in a coordinated way at the landscape scale. Developing this idea, Natural England (NE) and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) piloted similar approaches across other areas in England, one of which was on the South Downs between the rivers Arun and Adur. The concept was well received by the farming community and brought further benefits to the work individuals were doing on their farms. There are now over 100 Farm Clusters in England.



The project

The farm cluster concept is a simple one; farmers, land managers and local partners work together across the landscape to improve and enhance the environment, or put another way, work together to achieve more than they can on their own. The farm cluster approach is very much from the bottom up, with farmers and landowners forming the group and deciding their own aims and objectives. A trusted local advisor is often appointed to run and coordinate the group on a day to day basis, with a steering group consisting of members and locally relevant partners providing direction.

The majority of the farm clusters in England are funded through the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund. This is a competitive pot of money that funds an individual or organisation to help groups of farmers and land managers work together at a landscape scale. To secure the funding, they need to have a plan that lists the targets and actions they plan to undertake. However, some clusters are funded in different ways including privately, such as through water companies, or self-funded where members pay a fixed fee or fee per hectare of their holding.

There are six farm clusters within the South Downs National Park; the Eastern South Downs Farmers Group, Arun to Adur Farmers Group, Rother Valley Farmers Group, South Downs Farmers Group, Selborne Landscape Partnership and the Winchester Downs Farm Cluster. They range in size from just under 5,000ha to over 30,000ha and have anywhere between 10 and 45 members. The South Downs National Park Authority works with all of these clusters, providing support and assistance to deliver their aims.

“Farm clusters have really improved the way we work together across the landscape”

Dominic Gardner, Lee Farm, Angmering Estate

The outcome

The farm clusters on the South Downs are undertaking a range of different projects including:

- Farmland bird recovery – improving conditions for priority species such as lapwing, grey partridge and barn owl
- Habitat restoration and connectivity – linking areas of nationally important chalk grassland
- Resource protection – working with water companies to identify ways to improve water quality
- Public engagement – telling people about how farmers care for the landscape whilst producing quality food

These projects are being delivered in partnership with a range of organisations and experts including the South Downs National Park Authority, Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Natural England, RSPB, Wildlife Trusts, Butterfly Conservation, National Farmers Union and Water Companies. It really is a collaborative approach where knowledge and ideas are shared to maximise environmental delivery.

Although still in the early stages, we are already starting to see some great progress. Highlights include:

- Successful Farm Open Days attended by over 600 people
- Species range expansion e.g. Duke of Burgundy butterfly
- Creation of new priority habitats such as chalk grassland
- Active farm cluster social media accounts
- Improved species recording

The future

The longest running groups have only been in existence for three to four years. For some, this means that their current Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Funding is due to end in one to two years' time.

However, the farm cluster concept is gaining a lot of momentum and is already delivering some great things. Many, if not all, of the groups see this as a long-term project and have more plans and ideas in the pipeline.

We expect to see much more from them in the future as they continue to grow and develop, and possibly for more clusters to be set up over time. It would be great to think that the whole South Downs National Park could be covered by farm clusters at some point.

As we prepare to leave the EU, there is potential for farm clusters to become an important part of UK Agricultural Policy, facilitating planning, prioritisation and delivery of public benefits at the landscape scale.

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The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP)

2014–19 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 11 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 1: *The landscape character of the National Park, its special qualities and local distinctiveness have been conserved and enhanced by effectively managing land and the negative impacts of development and cumulative change.*

Outcome 2: *There is increased capacity within the landscape for its natural resources, habitats and species to adapt to the impacts of climate change and other pressures.*

Outcome 3: *A well-managed and better connected network of habitats and increased population and distribution of priority species now exist in the National Park.*

<http://www.southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf>

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