Inspirational Ideas

NEWSLETTER JUNE 2017

Data sharing through Farmbench

The digital revolution is now upon us and more and more technologies are available to the agricultural sector. Farmers in the UK, for example, can use Farmbench (farmbench.ahdb.org.uk).

Farmbench collects and shares data from across the UK, providing farmers with useful indications on potential changes to their farm management practices which can eventually help them to manage risks and to cope with price volatility.

Benchmarking for improved management

Market prices for agricultural products fluctuate greatly, and volatility is likely to increase due to – among others - currency swings and adverse climatic events. This may affect the resilience of many farm businesses. It is becoming more and more important for farmers to be competitive and controlling the cost of production is essential.

Watch the video

Benchmarking can support farmers to improve their productivity and sustainability performance, especially in an uncertain context. Valuable lessons can be drawn from benchmarking by raising the questions such as: Why and how are others better? What can be learnt? How can my farm catch up? Many farmers already do this informally by discussing yields and output prices with other producers, but online benchmarking tools can collect from a wider range of farms, taking into account many different aspects of businesses, and can provide more accurate management advice.

"The basic principle of benchmarking is that if you can measure it, you can manage it." Says Giles Blatchford, Head of Farm Economics, from the Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board (AHDB).

Farmbench tool

"AHDB's role is to inspire our farmers, growers and industry to succeed in a rapidly changing world" says Giles. Competitiveness and resilience is a key part of success and AHDB has developed Farmbench, a free online business tool for Cereal and Oilseed, Potato, and Beef and Lamb enterprises, with Dairy coming on-board in early 2018. Giles is leading the Farmbench project, he says: "It helps to understand and compare full costs of production at both individual enterprise and whole-farm level."

Farmers enter physical and financial farm performance data on an individual field, a whole crop or even a whole farm into the system. The three main categories of indicators are: 1. Financial (e.g. sales, costs and margins); 2. Technical (e.g. utilisation of fertilisers or animal health products); and 3. Productivity (e.g. outputs such as crop yields or progeny sold per breeding animal).

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All Farmbench users can access reports at any time comparing their performance against an average of at least 15 other similar businesses. Reports can be generated according to different criteria that the user selects. Data collected is also used by the AHDB to publish national sector reports annually, and specific reports are also generated for use in discussion groups.

In terms of privacy, farmers upload their data and retain ownership of their data, they access and manage their data through secure passwords. All data becomes anonymous once uploaded to the site. The farmer is aware of who has access to data in the programme dashboard and they need to give permission for further use. Data is also validated before being included in comparative aggregated data.

Benefits for farmers

Farmers can make decisions on how to improve their business by analysing the data they provide against the other data available.

"Farmbench is about finessing and fine tuning individuals cost of production so producers can make informed decisions for their future as a sustainable business" adds Giles.

"Sometimes these will be a reality check. Very often this informs succession plans and crucial decisions for all family members in the farming business."

"Unless we as an industry can recognise our strengths and weaknesses we are unable to improve and develop. Our ability to be progressive and competitive is vital."

The system enables farmers, both individually and collectively, to be more efficient, productive and sustainable.

It is a tool, which is simple to use, and production costs can be split across beef, sheep, potato, dairy and arable enterprises within one farm. "This is innovative compared to other existing benchmarking tools which specialise in one enterprise, and means that users get a better understanding of their whole farm costs and detailed enterprise data." Says Giles.

Case Study

"Benchmarking helps me to identify our strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes they're not where you think they are."

Adrian Joynt is the farm manager at the Apley Estate in Shropshire in the West of England. Apley is a 1,000ha mixed farm with parkland and rough grazing for 220 suckler cows. Some land is rented out for potatoes and the rest is put to mixed crops.

"There was a lot of information that previously we had to enter twice in order to benchmark the whole farm, such as labour, power and machinery, insurance costs and telephone bills. But with Farmbench we just put the costs in once, and then apportion them out to each enterprise accordingly."

"Farmbench will help me to save up to 40% of my time spent inputting information across the arable and livestock enterprises. That's a very significant saving. Farmbench will also mean that we can compare ourselves with farms right across the country, because we'll all be using the same system and we'll have the consistency to make the comparisons."

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More information and contact

This initiative was presented as an example at the recent **EIP-AGRI Workshop 'Data sharing models'**

Watch the video

https://farmbench.ahdb.org.uk/

More information on benchmarking: **EIP-AGRI Focus Group on 'Benchmarking of Farm Productivity and Sustainability Performance'**

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