

UNITED KINGDOM

Innovation & Knowledge transfer

A network that helps improve sustainability through farmer-led innovation. 'Field labs' and research grants provide farmers with skills, support and scientific backing to find solutions to the challenges which farmers face.

The challenge

Farmers need to develop more sustainable practices in agriculture, and have a number of agricultural challenges from weeds to economics, including the need to increase resource efficiency, lower antibiotic use and reduce the use of pesticides. Research on innovation systems shows that experimentation by farmers is a vital but largely unsupported driver of change within agriculture.



Main steps and features

The network is run by the Soil Association in collaboration with the Organic Research Centre, LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming), Innovation for Agriculture and the retailer Waitrose, with funding from the Prince of Wales' Charitable Foundation. It is open to organic and non-organic farmers.

At the heart of the network are 'field labs'. Groups of five or more farmers identify a shared problem and test solutions on their own farms. The group has a coordinator, who facilitates meetings, and is supported by a researcher specialising in the relevant field – crop science, animal science, agronomy or ecology.

Coordinators share the results through a web portal (www.innovativefarmers.org) and communication specialists help disseminate results. The field lab approach was inspired by 'farmer field schools', used by over 10 million farmers in developing countries, which involve peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, learning and improving by experience, on-farm research and development, regular field observations and group analysis.

The network attracts innovative farmers, supports them to experiment with greater rigour and resources, and shares the learning widely.



Location
Scotland

Programming period
n/a

Funding (EUR)
(£1.5m in the first 3 years),
member fees and
sponsorships

Duration
2012 – On-going

Implemented by
Soil Association & partners

Contact
info@innovativefarmers.org

Website
www.innovativefarmers.org

Results

Over the first three years, 750 farmers were involved in 35 field lab topics. The results have included reductions in antibiotic use through improved herd management, and adoption of cover crops. An independent evaluation found that 86% of farmers felt they were getting value from participation, 56% were inspired to make changes on their own farm as a result of participation, and 37% had already done so.

The ethos is farmer-led, bottom up research, and the farmers themselves report that the value is beyond the experiments and in the relationships they develop, benefitting the resilience and sustainability of their businesses. Researchers also benefit by informing their own work, making it 'real-world', and 62% of researchers applying for research grants in the second year of the programme believed that engaging with farmers had improved their proposal. Over 3,000 people have benefitted from the wider knowledge exchange resulting from the programme

Challenges and lessons

- ❑ The success of the programme over the first three years led to the web portal being developed in 2015, and the programme extended, so that the previously free-standing field labs join together in an expanding member network. In this manner, the network can be long-lasting and sustainable beyond the original intervention, and farmer groups can undertake successive field labs. The fee for membership is kept low at £240 per year to encourage sign up, yet also contribute to the participation costs (which are supplemented by private sponsorship)
- ❑ The network is growing. Since the web portal was launched in October 2015, 40 prospective group coordinators have attended induction sessions with a view to setting up new farmer groups. The network has also established a group of research partners, who each sign up to give 24 hours per year of in-kind time to farmer groups, providing a pathway to research impact for the participating researchers.
- ❑ The web portal also becomes a repository for information, with a space for members and the public to access information and outcomes by area, topic and sector, so the outcomes for each group are further exchanged. The initiative aligns closely with the EIP, and was highlighted by Defra when the EIP was announced in England.