

Soil Action Plan Advisory Forum Newsletter

Issue 13: August 2006

Actions

1. Please send any information to be included in the next newsletter to [Becca Taylor](#) by **Monday 25 September**. It is our intention to circulate the newsletter at the end of each month unless the volume of material is insufficient.

General

1. The [Second Annual Report for the Soil Action Plan](#) has been published on the Defra website. This presents progress made in delivering the plan's 52 actions during its second year.
2. The next AF meeting will be held on Tuesday 28 November. Further details including meeting time and venue will be circulated in due course. In the meantime could those that have not already done so please let [Becca Taylor](#) know whether they are able to attend.

SUS (Sustainable Soil Management)

1. As noted in Issue 11 of the newsletter Defra has funded a 2 year project to develop agricultural organic matter management advice. The project is managed by the RDS and involves GY Associates and Rothamstead Research. The project is designed to run alongside the Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) programme, and will aim to provide advice to support the work of this programme to reduce diffuse pollution. The project also aims to monitor farmers' attitudes to soil organic matter (SOM) management and develop short-term indicators of SOM status in the soil. While the main focus of the project is lowland agriculture, in common with the CSF programme, information on moorland management initiatives for managing moorland soils and peat to prevent erosion and sequester carbon will also be collated. The project includes a socio-economic and soil science research project in six priority areas comprising 8 catchments (Exe, Wensum, Lugg, Eden, Bassenthwaite, Test, Itchen, West Peak District Dales) and hopes to influence farmers by providing them with case study information on the likely economic impact of changing their SOM management. For further information, contact [Matthew Shepherd](#), 01392 352053.



BUI (Soils in the Built Environment/Planning)

1. The informal public consultation on our proposed changes to the British Standard for Topsoil closed on 4 August. The consultation produced an endorsement of our Terms of Reference and introduced some additional ideas for consideration. Following the consultation, a project to produce a working draft of the proposed revisions was let and is now nearing completion. The output of this project will be circulated to the Working Group for comment before being used as the basis for a two day drafting workshop towards the end of September. This workshop (which WRAP is funding) will produce a revised draft document for broader consultation within Government and by the BSI.
2. Project SP08004: The Economic Valuation of Soil Functions Phase 1 (Method Development) has now reported. The final report will shortly be available on the [Defra website](#). This project has broken new ground and represents a valuable first step towards placing a monetary value on the services that soil provides. The project pursued a “marginal change” approach to soil valuation. Using this method, the impact of a change in a soil property on the functions that depend on it could be quantified and the loss of function is valued. This method would theoretically allow the financial impact of relatively minor changes in soil management as well as larger land use changes to be quantified. However, the report established that the extent of existing information is quite limited and only a small proportion of the services that soil provides can currently be valued. To address this lack of information, the report identified two broad areas in need of further work: quantification of the link between soil parameters and the functions that the soil provides (and what a unit change in one means for the other); and establishing the economic value of the change in soil function. This primary research is essential to developing a broader picture of the value of the functions that soil provides and we will be attempting to contact funders of fundamental research to consider how this can be taken forward.
3. Project SP0701: Fate of Surplus Soil at Development Sites has now reported and is [available](#). The report uses a range of highly illustrative case studies and interviews with industry representatives to assess the fate of surplus soil on development sites. Currently a large volume of soil finds its way to landfill as construction ‘waste’. Conversely, topsoil is often imported to construction sites unnecessarily. We want to encourage more sustainable use of the existing soil on-site, to reduce waste and the need to import topsoil as well as reducing the risk of localised flooding by implementing ‘[Sustainable Drainage Systems](#)’ (‘SUDS’). We are therefore in the process of collaborating with the DTI, EA and the construction (and landscaping) industry to produce a Code of Practice for the sustainable use and management of soils on construction sites (see article below). The ‘Fate of Surplus Soils’ report is a valuable addition to the Built Environment evidence base and is of direct relevance to the construction code of practice. The Code will also be mindful of the proposed changes to the British Standard for Topsoil and will reflect these where possible.
4. The inaugural meeting of the steering group for the proposed joint Defra/DTI Code of Practice for the sustainable use and management of soils on construction sites was held on 3 August. In addition to members of Defra’s Soils Policy Team and DTI’s Construction Sector Unit, the group has representation from the Environment Agency, Rural Development Service, Waste & Resources Action Programme and a number of construction and landscape industries, including Balfour Beatty and Bovis Lend Lease. Stephen Nortcliff from the Advisory Forum is also a member of the group. Discussion at this first meeting was

highly constructive and we have noted the many valuable comments and suggestions about the need for a Code and what it might contain.

EVI (Evidence and Access to Information)

1. Following on from the work of the Soil Guideline Values Task Force, work is ongoing to consider and resolve issues around the production and use of Soil Guideline Values and related material. Defra's main aim is to improve the technical guidance on the assessment of risks to human health from contaminated land, including Contaminated Land Exposure Assessment (CLEA). A workshop was held on 13 July to consider some of the emerging conclusions of this work. The long standing policy objectives for contaminated land were outlined, and the problems being faced by Local Authorities and other practitioners in applying the technical guidance, and the links with development, urban regeneration and future house building activity were also considered. Additionally, the issues and ideas for adjustments to CLEA which will be pursued were outlined. Technical discussion papers are now being prepared for Defra which will set out what is envisaged. These should be going out to key organisations and interests in the near future for comment, and subject to the comments received, a work programme will be developed and the papers made publicly available later in the autumn. Please let us know if you would be particularly interested in seeing the ongoing work in this area. Meanwhile work is already underway to develop some of the outputs which are envisaged. For further information, contact [Steve Griffiths](#), 020 7082 8565.
2. A headline indicator for [Soil Organic Matter](#) has been published under the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy. The indicator is: "To halt the decline of soil organic matter caused by agricultural practices in vulnerable soils by 2025, whilst maintaining, as a minimum, the soil organic matter of other agricultural soils, taking into account the impacts of climate change". The full list of indicators is also [available](#).