

Soil Action Plan Advisory Forum - Actions
Thursday 22 February 2007: Defra, LG04/05/06, 1A Page Street,
London SW1P 4PQ

Present: [Defra unless otherwise stated] Antje Branding (SEERAD), Sal Burgess, Phil Chatfield (EA), Peter Costigan, Paul Davenport, Jim Densham (RSPB), Maya de Souza – Chair, Bridget Emmett (CEH), Pam Frost (RPA), Keith Goulding (Rothamsted Research), Derek Holliday, Joanna Jenkinson (BBSRC), Mark Kibblewhite (NSRI), Andrew Kuyk, Joanne Kwan (CIRIA), Andy Moffat (Forest Research), Archie Montgomery (NFU), Stephen Nortcliff (SRAC), David Rimmer (BSSS), Gill Shaw (NE), Matthew Shepherd (NE), Judith Stuart, Becca Taylor – Minutes

Apologies: Brian Chambers (ADAS), Caroline Drummond (LEAF), Rob George (Soil Association), Julie Hitchcock, John Hodgson, Dan Houseago (National Trust), Pamela Kempton (NERC), Phil Murray (IGER), Tanya Olmeda-Hodge (CLA), Sebastian Payne (English Heritage), Steve Robinson, Lindsey Stewart (NE), Graeme Willis (CPRE), Matt Winter (Highways Agency), Anna Wetherell (NE), Anne Wood (DCLG), Alan Woods (CIWEM)

EU Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection, including proposals for a Soil Framework Directive

A presentation was given by Paul Davenport, Defra, outlining latest developments on the EU Soil Thematic Strategy and proposals for a Soil Framework Directive. The following points were made in the resulting discussion:

- Biodiversity was left out of proposals for a Soil Framework Directive (SFD) as Working Groups determined that although biodiversity was important, it was difficult to set and evaluate targets without further research. However, under the ENVASSO project, biodiversity is one of the most advanced areas.
- There has been an increased recognition of the difficulty in setting targets and monitoring for other threats too. Single targets cannot be set in Europe due to differences in soil type, location, land-use, etc.
- Although the Commission's proposals do not set targets, but follow a risk based, spatial approach, the UK has concerns that expectations could be set despite this. Need to avoid prescription e.g. salinisation is not a particular concern for the UK so does not need to be addressed, though need to consider the consequences of managed retreat.
- Similarly there is a need to consider situations where management to overcome one threat could impact on another, e.g. where cleaning up contamination could see the loss of biodiversity.
- Farming community keen that the SFD does not impose further regulation. UK recognise this and are pushing for the overlap with existing legislation to be removed; for Member States to be able to use existing practices to meet SFD requirements.
- Department for Communities and Local Government are involved in UK negotiations. They have participated in work on our Regulatory Impact

Assessment and are represented on the Project Board, where their input will be particularly valuable in determining lines to take on the soil sealing proposals. We are keen to ensure that they are kept involved as negotiations develop.

Action: AF members to provide input to the UK negotiating line on the proposed Soil Framework Directive as appropriate.

Inspections of the cross compliance Soil Protection Review

A presentation was given by Pam Frost, RPA (attached), outlining the inspection process, inspector training, etc. Due to time, discussion was limited:

- Inspectors have guidance to ensure that they make consistent decisions. Following an inspection they must complete a report justifying their assessment and report any breaches to the processing team to determine the level of penalty required.
- There are 200 trained inspectors that cover the full range of cross compliance. Approximately 100-120 of these are being trained to cover soils expertise (following the Environment Agency *Think Soils* training course), meaning that they will conduct roughly 12 inspections each (c.1160 soil inspections will be undertaken in total).

Catchment Sensitive Farming Soil Carbon project

A presentation was given by Matthew Shepherd, Natural England, outlining the background and latest developments to this project. Discussion followed:

- Research has been undertaken, showing that woodlands do not always encourage an increase of soil carbon. This potential for loss is recognised and the research will be used in the project.
- Concern that the project could result in further regulation for farmers. This is not the intention, the project is based on existing practices and the use of case studies to encourage change.

Action: AF members to let Matthew Shepherd know if they are interested in joining the Project Advisory Group for this project.

Soil Strategy for England from 2007 and the role of the Advisory Forum

A presentation was given by Judith Stuart, Defra, outlining our plans for a strategy to follow on from the Soil Action Plan. Discussion was based around a number of topics:

Outcomes:

- The main effort will be to reduce SOC decline, rather than stop or reverse it, simply because of the effort required.
- "Soil contamination" covers all contaminants to soil, so impacts of air quality are covered here.
- Compaction is coupled with erosion as the mechanisms to deal with the two are similar. However, we are open to suggestions on this.
- There is no outcome on biodiversity included as more research is required in this area. Need to know more about what we want to achieve. We will consider adding this need for research to the strategy; results from UKSIC could have an impact.

- Use of terminology needs to be clear e.g. different understandings of “contamination”

Priority work areas:

- Should be all planning decisions, not just local planning decisions, that are taken and acted on with an understanding of the potential impacts on soil.
- Soils in the natural environment/semi-natural habitats are not a priority area and are therefore not specified in the strategy. They will be tackled through other measures.
- Complexities relating to the link between work areas and priorities is recognised and will be mapped in the strategy.

Advisory Forum role:

- There was general agreement to the proposal of an annual meeting to inform and update a wide range of stakeholders in relation to the strategy, as well as additional workstreams/ad hoc meetings to take place as required.

Other:

- It was stressed by Defra that a strategy approach has been chosen to allow flexibility to adapt to changing priorities. Initial actions/targets will be included under each priority area to focus delivery.
- Discussions are ongoing on whether there should be an end-date for the strategy. Outcomes will only be achieved in the long-term, so it is likely that there will be no end-date, but instead review dates (annual reporting has been drafted into the strategy).
- The strategy attempts to draw out links with other strategies and work areas.

Action: Soils Team to take comments on board in finalising the strategy for consultation.