



Ten years of organic support for Wales

Ten years of support for the organic sector in Wales has paid dividends. In 1999, when the first Welsh Organic Action Plan was prepared by the Welsh Agri-Food Partnership less than 0.3% of land area was organic. Now the figure is over 8%, and many new businesses have been

established. The original Action Plan identified the need for a range of support and this has been delivered through the Organic Farming Scheme, the Welsh Development Agency and its successor the Food and Fisheries Market Development Division at the Welsh Assembly Government,

Organic Centre Wales and the Farming Connect Organic Development Programme. Most recently the Better Organic Business Links (BOBL) project is building on this successful work towards a sustainable organic sector.

It has been a difficult 18 months for everyone,

and the organic sector has not escaped unscathed. Much was made in the press of the drop in organic sales reported in the recent 2010 Organic Market Report published by the Soil Association. There are signs that things are improving, with predictions of 2-5% growth during this year.

Glastir

On the production side, Glastir is at the forefront of many farmers' minds, and in May this year, they had the opportunity to express interest in joining the scheme. Electronic scorecards on the WAG website help farmers select the most suitable options to reach the required points to enter the All Wales Element (AWE) of Glastir (see box).

Organic farming has the potential to deliver on all the main challenges that Glastir seeks to address (climate change, carbon capture, water management and bio-diversity). Organic farmers only need half the points normally required to enter the AWE. Farmers converting to organic production will be supported and all farmers will get a whole farm payment on top of the options-related payments, which in many cases will cover certification fees.

It is not yet clear what support will be available to organic farmers within the Targeted Element (TE) of the scheme. Organic Centre Wales is working closely with the Welsh Assembly Government on this issue and more information is available on the 'Strategy' pages of our new website.



Glastir scorecards: the options

The scorecards list the management options available within the AWE.

Farmers can choose between using two scorecards: dairy farmers can choose from three:

1. Basic
2. Regional - available to farmers based on their home postcode and provides enhanced points for particular groups of options
3. Dairy - provides enhanced points for certain options



Building recognition of organic foods



Important changes to the rules on labelling organic products set out in EU Regulation 834/2007 come into force in July 2010. One of them relates to displaying the new EU organic logo on pre-packed food products. OCW has produced a factsheet outlining the requirements – phone to request a copy or see our website.

Although there have been complaints about the compulsory new logo, the positive aspect is that there is a chance to build consumer recognition of legally certified

produce and to develop organic as a brand.

When the 2003 EU Organic Action Plan was produced it became clear that consumers didn't understand what 'organic' means, and so a fund was made available to run information campaigns in member states. In the UK, a group of organic businesses has come together to apply for this funding. We will hear in July if we have been successful, but in the meantime you may see some 'advertorials' in the press. See www.whyiloveorganic.co.uk.

Male dairy calves: it can't go on any longer

No one is happy about the disposal at birth of unwanted male calves from the organic dairy herd. The reasons it is done are mainly economic. If an organic dairy farmer rears a bull calf to 12 weeks of age, which is what the organic standards require, it will cost the farmer about £400 in milk, bedding and so on, but its market value will be nearer £40. Unfortunately, the abattoir carcass classification system penalises the finished animal for their poor conformation. Who would want to rear male dairy calves when they have 'financial loss' so clearly written all over them?

Business as usual though isn't an option: although the calves are slaughtered humanely, it is still a wasteful practice and one which is increasingly unacceptable to consumers. The Soil Association changed its standards in January, requiring all its producers to phase out the practice. That is why organic dairy farmers, organic milk processors, control bodies, meat buyers and abattoirs have begun a dialogue which will result in a variety of alternative uses for the



Photo: Nick Rebbeck

animals. A small number of organic dairymen are already selling rosé veal or 16-month bull beef, while others have bravely taken on animals to finishing weight and persuaded Waitrose to buy them!

OCW's BOBL project is working with the organic dairy sector in Wales to see what can be done.

Soil Association

The Soil Association's latest Organic Market Report was published on Monday 12 April. Sales of organic products in the UK fell by 12.9% in 2009 to £1.84 billion. Yet despite the tough economic climate, the report also indicates signs of increasing confidence amongst consumers. Based on evidence from the early months of this year, the Soil Association predicts a modest market expansion of between 2% to 5% in 2010. Organic products continue to attract shoppers from across the social spectrum, with groups that include manual and casual workers, pensioners, students and people on benefits accounting for 33% of the spend. Peter Melchett, Policy Director at the Soil Association, said: "The question we should really be asking is not 'can we afford organic food?' but 'can policy makers afford to carry on playing down the potential of organic farming's contribution to food security and tackling climate change?' In the meantime, we need to rekindle the kind of consumer demand that will ultimately be impossible for policy makers and retailers, to ignore." The full report is available on the Soil Association website www.soilassociation.org

Glastir – keep your options open

Some farmers are unsure whether they can commit to farming organically within the All Wales Element (AWE) of Glastir as they will not know if they have access to TE support when they enter the AWE. Farmers should talk to Organic Centre Wales or their advisers before making any commitments, and there will be many Farming Connect information events over the summer.

New demonstration farms

A warm welcome to ...



Photo: John Court

Arwyn and Carol Evans, Moel y Cathau

Mike Westrip and Alice Tite, Hill Cottage Market Garden, Knighton. Mike and Alice begin their third season at Hill Cottage. We have worked with Mike for many years at Penpont Estate near Brecon and those of you who attended meetings there will know him as a highly competent grower, an excellent communicator and a great innovator. The farm is profiled on page 4.

Peter Bottoms, Esgair Forest, Machynlleth. Peter bought this 250 ha mature forest in 2007 and recently started converting it to organic status. He is constructing a new sawmill and has plans to put in a new woodchip boiler. However, his unique approach means that he sees more than wood and trees! He is particularly interested in the different ways he can use the forest to produce food. His initial focus will be on woodland poultry, but woodland pigs and soft fruit are also possibilities.

Arwyn and Carol Evans, Moel y Cathau. Arwyn and Carol farm 60 suckler cattle and 450 ewes in the hills above Llangernyw, Abergele, and finished a standard organic conversion in May 2010. Their mix of hill, mountain and lowlands is good for an organic system, but presents a few challenges. They are growing whole-crop barley and swedes and looking into other possibilities, such as kale.

Arwyn explains: "Over the last few years I have had a belly full of conventional farming, applying costly fertilizers and feeding large quantities of minerals, chasing my tail with the amount of work and not enjoying the experience.

I was looking for a new challenge, something to get my teeth into, and finding pleasure in working on the farm again. I am already finding that the livestock and the land are performing better, with reduced stock numbers and fewer inputs. The main challenge is the lack of conserved forage for the winter months, because it's a seven-month winter where we are! I am hoping that with a little advice I'll work out a system that will make me self sufficient."

Organic Centre Wales will be organising open days at all these farms. Do get in touch if you have ideas about the topics we could tackle.

And our thanks to ...

Alwyn and Lowri Williams of Cappelé, who have recently left the Demonstration Farm network, for all their hard work. We will continue to work with them through the Grŵp Trafod Organig Hiraethog.



Alwyn and Sion Williams of Cappelé

Community Supported Agriculture

Farming in partnership with other producers is a concept that everyone is familiar with, but what about farming in partnership with your customers? This is the big idea behind Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The exact nature of the partnership varies. Some are producer led with community members paying up front at the beginning of the season for a share of the harvest (see box). Others are driven by community members who actively seek out local farms. In more developed systems, producers and community members have closer involvement, for instance through co-ownership of the land, or by community members providing labour and expertise to produce, pack and distribute food.

“There are benefits for both sides,” says Tony Little of OCW. “Producers can enjoy a more secure and predictable income, and more involvement with the local community. Community members meanwhile have better access to fresh food from a known and trusted source, benefit from a more resilient and sustainable local food system and learn about food production methods and costs.”

The last few years have seen a rapid increase in interest in CSA, and several fledgling projects are starting up in Wales in addition to a few longer established enterprises. OCW is using resources from Farming Connect and the Better Organic Business Links project to promote the concept of CSA. We have held a number of events over the last two years and have recruited a CSA farm to our demonstration farm network.

Case study

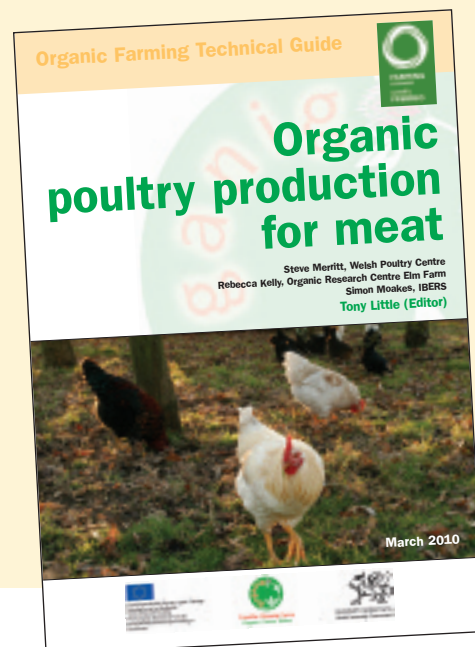
Mike Westrip and Alice Tite recently completed organic conversion on a 2 ha market garden in Powys, where they produce protected crops and field vegetables. They sell all their produce within four miles of the farm through market stalls and a bag scheme, delivering to three pick-up points. Now, some of their customers have signed up to a CSA scheme and pay for a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season. They buy vouchers in £5 or £10 denominations to the value of between £200 and £400, and then exchange them at the market stall or the bag scheme. At present they have ten members, and they hope to get another 20 by the end of year. Mike said “We have had a fantastic response from the local community and I am very encouraged. We only started growing a couple of years ago, and I’m sure the scheme will grow as the word gets around.”



New booklet: Organic poultry production for meat

This new technical guide is funded through the Farming Connect Organic Development Programme and covers all the main aspects of production and processing including: feeding; breeds; brooding; growing the birds; range management; slaughtering and processing; gross margins and other financial data. It is written by Steve Merritt from the Welsh Poultry Centre, Rebecca Kelly from the Organic Research Centre Elm Farm and Simon Moakes at the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences, drawing on over 15 years of practical experience, the latest research findings and the most recent financial data available.

Tony Little from Organic Centre Wales, who edited the guide said: “We have been receiving an increasing number of enquiries from people interested in producing organic table birds, including organic farmers diversifying into poultry, conventional farmers considering conversion and new entrants into farming. This guide is primarily aimed at people starting organic production for the first time, but I hope that more experienced producers will also find it useful.”



Your business, the cost of fuel and other inputs

Anxieties and scares about finite resources are increasing – we know about peak oil and the predicted end of cheap energy – and now other inputs including phosphorus (see page 6) are possibly at risk. Rather than ignoring the issues and hoping they won't impact on you, it may be comforting or maybe just a wake-up call, to assess just how much your business depends on these inputs. There are tools available to help businesses to assess their resource use and identify where they may be vulnerable to price increases or shortages, and see what changes can be made to reduce the use of finite resources.

Different tools have different approaches so that some

will be more suitable than others for your business and your interest. The BOBL project is committed to helping individuals and businesses identify which tool is most useful for them: we have completed this for farms, and have produced a grid which will help you select the best tool for the job.

The task is more complicated for processors and for supply chains, but it was a key aim of the BOBL project to help the organic supply chain improve its environmental performance. We will conduct a review of the tools available for this task, and follow up with a seminar for businesses to discuss the conclusions and recommendations.

Teachers' conference

Organic Centre Wales, working with FACE Cymru, the National Botanic Garden of Wales and the Federation of City Farms and Gardens, recently organized a conference to consult teachers on the delivery of food and farming education in schools. The conference included a locally

sourced meal with some organic ingredients, as part of the BOBL project to develop sustainable procurement. "The Growing the Future network has held a series of conferences to share good practice in food education and procurement," said Jane Powell. "Now we are very keen to put the focus on teachers, to hear what they most need in order to produce a generation of people who understand where food comes from and how to produce it."

Extending diversification at Penpont

This country house in the middle of the Brecon Beacons National Park is surrounded by a working farm, extensive grounds and an old Victorian walled garden, which has been producing organic fruit and vegetables for sale to the public since 2001. Gavin and Davina Hogg already offer tourist accommodation in the courtyard wing of the house, and now a restoration programme has been undertaken to develop the outbuildings as a venue hosting up to 80 people. The Organic Growers Alliance recently held their annual general meeting in The Stables, and farmers on a recent CEVAS course found it an ideal venue for a training day. See www.penpont.com

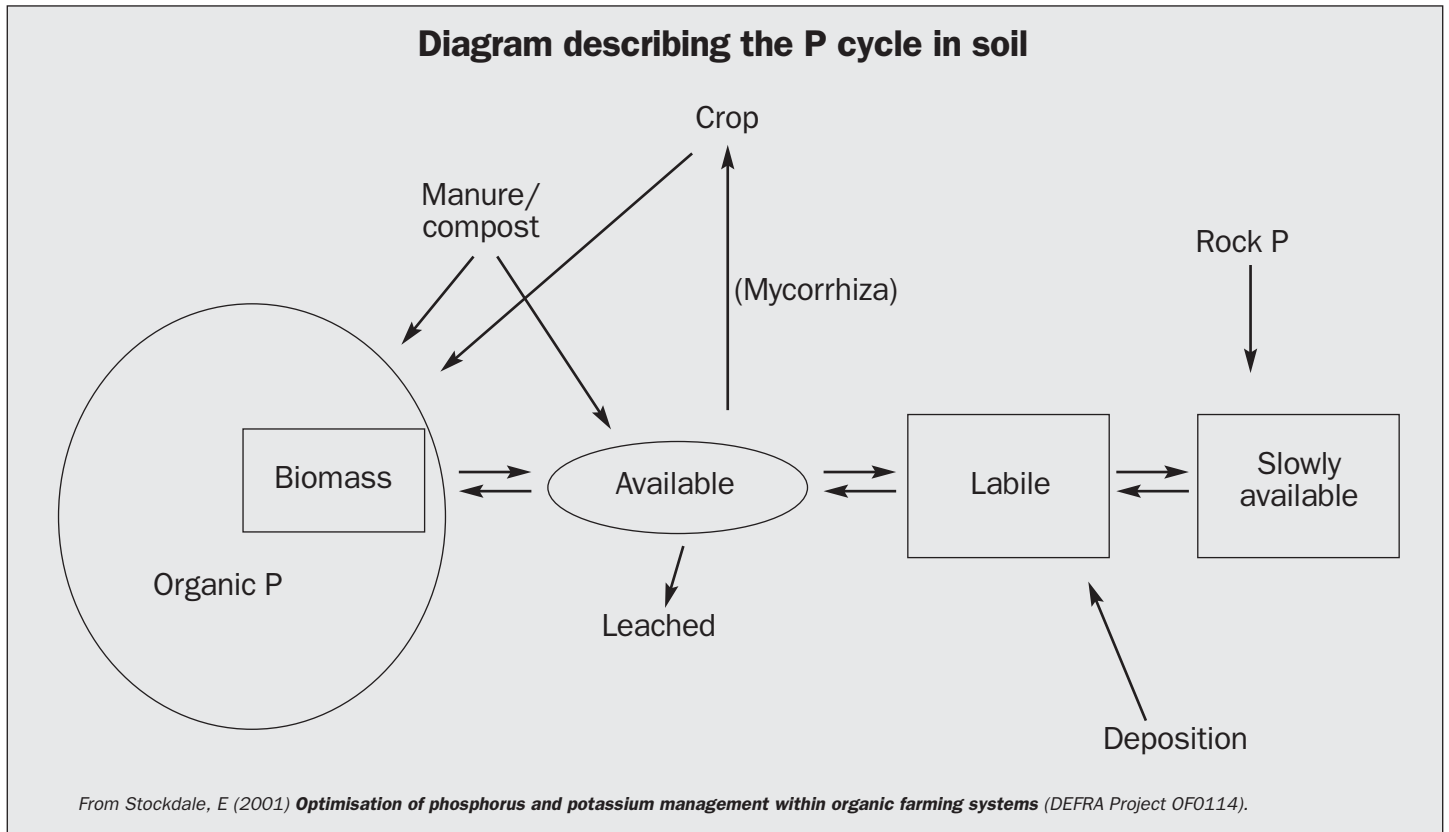


Nick Rebbeck

Sadly, one of Wales' organic stalwarts, Nick Rebbeck, died on 23rd April, following a battle with cancer. Nick farmed at Bwlchwernen Fawr near Lampeter with Patrick Holden for nearly 30 years and in 2004 started to co-ordinate school visits to organic and Tir Gofal farms. In 2005, he launched Learning on the Farm, which achieved over 400 visits from schools in Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Llanelli, Swansea and the Gower. In 2008 he was awarded Organic Centre Wales' Welsh Organic Farming Award. He said "My aim is to tell people there is a fantastic resource close to every school and college which offers real education and that is a farm". Over the six year period, he and his colleagues connected around 7500 children and adults with food, farming and the environment and also produced a DVD for Organic Centre Wales called "Learning along the food chain" which has been distributed to schools around Wales. Real change depends on the determination of individuals and Nick was one of those determined people that changed hearts and minds, but with good cheer and spirit.



Phosphorus and fertility



Most organic farmers find it relatively easy to build up sufficient nitrogen in their soils, but ensuring good levels of phosphorus (P) is more difficult. This is because P occurs mostly in organic forms that are hard for roots to absorb, and so many farmers use permitted P fertilisers to maintain acceptable yields. This does not entirely square with organic principles, which focus on biological cycles. In addition, global phosphate reserves are becoming depleted and may only last another 30 to 90 years, so we are likely to see price increases in the medium to long term.

What can we do to reduce our reliance on these inputs? There is a large amount of P in soil: anything between 500 and 2500 kg/ha, depending on the underlying rock, soil type and history, but only a very small proportion of this is available to the plant, so the question is how to release the P that is held in organic matter and convert it into a soluble, inorganic form.

Biological activity is a cornerstone of soil fertility, and creating conditions that are favourable to microbes is key to maintaining P levels. This means increasing the organic matter content, creating a good open structure and

maintaining optimal moisture levels, with a pH between 6 and 7. This will stimulate biological activity that will release P that is locked up in organic matter and in soil minerals.

Animal manures and composts are important organic sources of P, while the most common inorganic input is untreated rock phosphate. Green manures are a mainstay of organic production systems and they also play an important role in the P cycle. Many plant species have symbiotic relationships with fungi known as mycorrhizae that act as conduits between the roots and the P reserves in the soil. Roots are also active in their own right releasing enzymes and other chemicals that help to mobilise nutrients in the root zone, and deep rooting plants, such as chicory, can be helpful in bringing P up from the subsoil. Even so, it is microbial activity in the topsoil that is the most important factor.

In the end it really comes down to good soil and fertility management; but then, that's exactly what organic producers strive to do best.

The Organic Development Programme is delivered by Organic Centre Wales on behalf of Farming Connect



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Organic Centre Wales is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the EAFRD. It is based at Aberystwyth University and run jointly by ADAS Wales, the Organic Research Centre Elm Farm and Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences.

