

Another false dawn as break-up of SFI Soil Standards highlights continued lack of vision for English soils

Campaigners and researchers have welcomed the more flexible approach to the Sustainable Farming Incentive, but a lack of clarity about soil measurement, data collection and alignment with the private market points to a continued absence of strategic thinking about how the government will achieve sustainably managed soils in England.

- **The 2022 Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) Soils Standards (Arable and horticulture and Grassland) have been broken up just over a year after their launch.**
- **Some of the soil-specific actions - assessing soil, producing a soil management plan, testing soil organic matter, multi-species winter cover and herbal leys - will still be available among the 23 SFI 'pick and mix' actions.**
- **Three of the actions currently being paid for in SFI will not be available in the updated offer: add organic matter, single species winter cover and minimising bare ground.**
- **The scheme will pay farmers £129 per hectare per year for mixed cover crop and £5.80 per hectare (plus £95) to produce a soil management plan and test soil organic matter.**

Speaking after the announcement, Matthew Orman, Director of the Sustainable Soils Alliance said: “We welcome the decision to break up the Soil Standard since, as [we have highlighted to DEFRA](#), the bundling together of actions was too restrictive and didn’t offer value for money to either farmers or taxpayers.

“However, the scheme is still painfully vague in terms of what it aims to achieve – and how it will demonstrate impact over time. There is too little detail about how farmers should measure, assess and genuinely interpret their soil - and how any data will then feed into the national picture. Farmers, the food industry and other stakeholders are crying out for clear, consistent direction, such as the AHDB soil health scorecard, but instead get a vague suite of possible tools to pick from and promises of information further down the line.

“With soils it seems to be a constant sense of one step forward, two steps back. In the last year we have seen the Soil Standards published and then immediately abandoned, the Soil Action Plan promised and then rejected, and the target for sustainably managed soil significantly watered down. Instead, we have a series of piecemeal actions with no vision of what they are collectively trying to achieve. In other words, Groundhog Day for soils”

The government announcement explains how farmers may be asked to provide some information about their soil assessment and SOM testing results during their 3-year SFI agreement, while the soil management plan can be completed in a manner that can reasonably be expected to achieve this action’s aim.

Professor Guy Ziv of Leeds University and advisor to the SSA said: “We are happy to see that DEFRA are agile in fixing some of the [issues we mentioned to them](#) in relation to the alignment of SFI and private ecosystem markets. It needs to be an important objective of the SFI to enable farmers to simultaneously

benefit from private investment, and the new, unbundled approach makes that easier by paying for some of the soil sampling and baselining as well as removing some of the barriers and giving farmers more flexibility and choice.

“However, it still feels like a missed opportunity to ensure that public and private money can effectively align to achieve the estimated £3.7bn of external investment needed for the country (UK) to meet its nature-based targets. This could be achieved by investing in much more robust soil carbon monitoring – as is being done in Northern Ireland and Scotland – but instead the proposed payments rates of £5.8/ha for soil organic matter testing will only provide a rough idea of the soil organic carbon stock in soils, which will not be enough to allow those farmers participate in emerging carbon markets. High-integrity measurement is increasingly affordable and could act as a vital gateway for farmers to access private funds, and for the public benefit of being able to measure progress towards meeting UK Net Zero targets via carbon sequestration in soils.”

Speaking about the future of the scheme, Matthew Orman said: “We hope that the scheme will remain a work in progress, and responsive to the changing needs of farmers and the emerging opportunities to unlock private investment to support overall soil health. We would like to see payments for more targeted, area-specific actions in future, especially around (high-impact) organic matter additions and carbon storage.

“However, until a clear vision and pathway for our soils is established around which these actions – alongside regulations, guidance and nationwide monitoring - can align, these actions will struggle to deliver the genuine, systems-wide change our soils badly need.”

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Note to editors

1. Link to the SFI 2023 handbook including new actions and agreements (June 2023): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sfi-handbook-for-the-sfi-2023-offer>
2. Link to the Sustainable Soils Alliance Briefing Note on the SFI Soil Standards (May 2023): <https://sustainablesoils.org/images/pdf/SFI%20Soil%20Standards%20Brief%20May%202023.pdf>
3. Link to the University of Leeds Briefing Note on the SFI Soil Standards (May 2023): <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/policy-leeds/doc/unlocking-private-investment-soil-carbon-england>

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