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Survey shows high awareness of good practice in soil management and water protection

Farmers show a strong commitment to soil management and environmental protection, according to a survey conducted by the Voluntary Initiative and Catchment Sensitive Farming.

The survey of 146 farmers was conducted by agronomists working for members of the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC). It sought to identify practices that are used on farms involving soil management, cultivations, drainage and field practice which can prevent pesticides reaching water through soil run off and erosion or drain flow.

A high proportion (85%) of farmers had undertaken a Soil Protection Review, mostly driven by the need to satisfy cross compliance. Three-quarters (75%) had Soil Management Plans (SMPs), which in most instances were in place to address soil erosion risks. SMPs were favoured for their practical assistance in identifying issues and providing management advice.

Soil management issues varied with soil type and location. Farmers on sands were most concerned with erosion; while farmers in the East and South considered erosion a low risk. Compaction was considered by 88% of farmers to have occurred on their farms, with a many of those interviewed believing it affected over 20% of their land.

Farmers felt that drainage was considered 'reasonably effective' on 69% of farms, and 73% of farms had maps showing key features such as boreholes, drains and ditches. On 63% of farms, the risks of pesticides reaching watercourses through erosion, run-off or drainage were not considered significant. In fact, drainage losses can be the main source of pesticide losses during winter.

Over half the land was ploughed and a quarter of farms used the plough exclusively. At the other extreme, 14% used only non-plough techniques.

Half the farmers were aware of the risks of pesticide losses from tramlines. However, 47% of farms had tramlines running up and down slopes, as opposed to just 31% with tramlines across slopes – the preferred technique to minimise run-off from tramlines.

Weather influences the potential for pesticide losses from fields. Nearly two-thirds of farmers are trying to avoid spraying when the weather and soil conditions could lead to pesticide loss. However, nearly three-quarters admit to spraying in less than ideal conditions to overcome work backlogs.

Autumn-applied oilseed rape herbicides pose one of the biggest current challenges to drinking water quality compliance. Most farmers accepted the need for a buffer strip between rape crops and watercourses; however other options, such as changes to weed control strategies, were less well received with removal of winter oilseed rape from the rotation being the least popular.

"This survey shows that farmers are becoming increasingly aware of good practice to protect both soil fertility and prevent pesticides reaching water," said Hazel Doonan, head of AIC's Agronomy and Crop Protection sector. "However, there is clearly more to be done to develop a practical balance

between the seasonal pressures of timely treatments and the need to prevent products moving from where they are applied.

“BASIS-registered agronomists and Catchment Sensitive Farming officers can provide pragmatic advice on farm practices and infrastructure, tailored to soil type, location and season. Some of the measures to protect water quality can be funded through Environmental Stewardship or Catchment Sensitive Farming grants available in target areas and improvements in soil management and pesticide application also have potential financial benefits.”

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Notes for Editors

1. The survey can be downloaded from reports in the library section at www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk or [http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk/ Attachments/Resources/1460_S4.pdf](http://www.voluntaryinitiative.org.uk/Attachments/Resources/1460_S4.pdf)
2. The survey of 146 mainly arable farmers, covering 56,000ha, was conducted during the 2010/11 winter. Expert advice from GfK Kinetic provided data analysis and checked for statistically different responses between soils and regions.
3. The sponsors of The Voluntary Initiative are the Agricultural Engineers Association, Agricultural Industries Confederation, Country Land and Business Association, Crop Protection Association, National Association of Agricultural Contractors, the NFU, NFU Scotland and the Ulster Farmers Union.
4. The Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) is a partnership project between Defra, Environment Agency and Natural England which offers advice and support to farmers to reduce diffuse water pollution from agriculture. For further information see www.naturalengland.org.uk/csf

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