

# Minutes

<b>Title of meeting:</b>	Wales Land Management Forum (WLMF) Sub Group on Agricultural Pollution
<b>Location:</b>	Microsoft Teams Meeting
<b>Date of meeting:</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> January 2025
<b>Members present:</b>	Professor Rhys A. Jones, NRW Board Member (Chair) Dennis Matheson, TFA Sarah Jones, Dwr Cymru Welsh Water Sarah Hetherington, NRW David Ball, AHDB Nichola Salter, NRW Eimir Williams, Farming Connect Matt Walters, Welsh Government Andrew Chambers, Welsh Government Jon Goldsworthy, NRW Catherine Osborne, Welsh Government Fraser McAuley, CLA Rachel Lewis-Davies, NFU Cymru Marc Williams, NRW Ruth Johnston, NRW Gemma Haines, FUW Kate Snow, United Utilities Elen G. Richards, NRW
<b>Additional attendees:</b>	Sarah Brett Gail Pearce-Taylor Ieuan Davies Dr Susannah Bolton
<b>Apologies:</b>	Michelle Griffiths, NRW Creighton Harvey, CFF Gareth Parry, FUW Delyth Lewis-Jones, AHDB
<b>Secretariat:</b>	Bronwen Martin, NRW

## Item 1. Introductions, Apologies and Declaration of Interest

1. Professor Rhys A. Jones (NRW Board Member and WLMF Sub Group Chair) welcomed all to the Microsoft Teams meeting and noted apologies. Rhys welcomed representatives of the SAC River Nutrient Management Boards to the meeting.
2. The meeting is being recorded for the purpose of capturing the minutes and the digital file will be deleted once the meeting minutes have been approved.

3. No declarations of interest were raised in respect of agenda items.

- NB: All members of the group have completed declaration of interest forms already but should also declare if they have an interest in anything on the agenda.

## **Item 2. Review of Minutes and Actions**

4. Rhys confirmed that once the meeting minutes have been reviewed and formally agreed by the group, they will be published on the NRW website for the public to access. Therefore, it is important that the minutes are an accurate record of the meetings.
5. The group reviewed the previous minutes from the meeting held on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2024. Rhys noted that supplementary information regarding the breakdown of the Welsh Government £52m investment support will be included in the December minutes – a table was provided by Andrew Chambers, Welsh Government. The minutes were accepted as a true record.
6. Bronwen shared the outstanding actions log and verbal updates were provided where possible.

## **Item 3. SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group Report**

7. A copy of the SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group Report was circulated to the group ahead of the meeting. Representatives from the SAC Rivers Nutrient Management Boards were invited to join this meeting to discuss the report, subsequent recommendations and how the report might help to inform the develop the Nutrient Management Plans for the SAC Catchments. The group were encouraged to use this as an opportunity to identify who/how some of the recommendations can be taken forward.
8. Rhys provided a brief background and an overview of the timeline. A Task & Finish Group was commissioned, with input from the water quality Summit, to examine the issue of phosphorus in SAC Rivers. As a Sub Group, we discussed the report in detail in June 2024 and have been exploring ways in which the report can be promoted but there is some uncertainty as to how that could be achieved. A very useful meeting was held in late Autumn with representatives of Welsh Government where we had some feedback on the report and how we might try to achieve as much impact as possible on the basis of the report's recommendations. One suggestion was that we should try to engage with the Nutrient Management Boards, particularly because they are developing Nutrient Management Plans and perhaps the recommendations might feed into to the process. We also discussed focussing on a smaller number of recommendations and determining as a Sub Group:
  - Which ones are most achievable?
  - Which ones are most significant?
  - Whether we could provide more detail on how those recommendations might be taken forward by specific organisations.
  - What the time scales would look like?
  - What funding would be necessary in order to achieve those recommendations?
  - What are the outcomes?
  - What are the unintended consequences?

9. Rhys suggested that there are two strands to the conversation today, the first is to engage with the representatives of the Nutrient Management Boards, to hear more about their plans and whether there are some potential synergies between the plans and the report recommendations. The second strand is a group discussion around the recommendations and how they might be taken forward.
10. David Ball, AHDB provided context around developing and writing the report. The SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group was established by this group WLMF Sub Group on Agricultural Pollution. It was Task & Finish Group commissioned to investigate information, evidence and current science surrounding the issues of phosphates in the SAC Rivers, and more generally in water courses in Wales. The group convened a number of meetings and consisted of representatives from key sectors in the agricultural industry, along with experts in their fields. They examined and quantified the role of phosphate in the environment and rivers and looked at the current regulatory framework and whether there was a need for that to be enhanced. The report was intended to be a starting point to help inform future discussions and progress in this area and suggest the basis of future actions – WLMF Sub Group, Nutrient Management Boards and Welsh Government are all key to help address some of these requirements.
11. The recommendations laid out in the report are categorised into specific headings including advice and guidance, financial support, regulations, data and evidence and research and innovation. This group has previously discussed the report and summarised the recommendations and perhaps the next step is to identify two or three which we feel are vital to focus on. David said it would be interesting to hear what the representatives of the Nutrient Management Boards think of the report and the recommendations and whether it can help inform their Nutrient Management Plans.
12. Gail Pearce-Taylor explained that the Nutrient Management Boards (NMBs) across Wales were established in failing or close to failing SAC River catchments. Although, the Bannau Brycheiniog Brecon Beacons have formed a similar but more catchment-based approach to nutrient management in the National Park. We are coming towards the end of a three-year funding pot, which was allocated by Welsh Government (ends in March 2025). We were commissioned to set up the NMBs as a collaborative partnership in recognition that no single organisation can solve this complex issue. We've established governance, engagement and extremely in-depth evidencing to the Nutrient Management Plans (NMPs) on the catchment basis. Those plans are intended to meet two aims, the first aim is to allow development to go ahead in those catchments that are failing (e.g. nutrient neutral developments) and also to improve the condition of those SAC Rivers.
13. One of the first things that we did in West Wales was to create a nutrient calculator so that we know how much of an effect a development is having. That allows us to meet the first aim – developers in this area can accurately calculate the effect of their development and that has helped safeguard communities in predominantly rural areas, and it also helps to preserve the Welsh language there. We've also produced many more resources for developers, land users, citizen scientists, farmers and landowners including instructions and mitigation guidelines and we've also employed a Nutrient Neutral Ecologist.
14. To meet the second aim of seeking to improve the condition of SAC rivers, we've identified landscape scale interventions that are suitable on a site-specific basis.

Although impermissible for nutrient neutrality by NRW, this will help to restore the condition of the rivers, nevertheless. Gaps in the compliance report was a problem and an obstacle to making informed decisions; therefore, we've developed a monitoring project that uses innovative technology (e.g. LoRaWAN and satellites) for river water quality monitoring. We've created a NMB website and GIS open-source data which will hopefully be publicly available at the end of this month.

15. In southwest Wales for the Tywi, Teifi and Cleddau catchments, we will have our NMPs completed by the end of March. The Dee will also have a report and the Wye and Usk catchment partnership will have a catchment-based report to submit by then.
16. The NMPs are live documents, and we will continue to update them. Several reports will be published soon that will probably result in substantive changes to be made to the NMPs, including the NRW latest compliance report. There may also be some key revisions that we will need to make to the NMPs as a result of a deeper analysis by NRW into agriculture and the review of permits brought about by the situation in the Dee Catchment.
17. The Deputy First Minister has asked us how we would like the NMBs to look in the future. This will look different for each catchment, but for the Tywi, Teifi and the Cleddau catchments, we are looking to focus on two key themes – nature finance (how that can we stimulate investment in a way that's very inclusive and supported by communities) and move to more of a catchment based approach and following the lead of Bannau Brycheiniog to include other aspects such as health, flooding, net zero, net benefit for biodiversity etc. There are many reasons to move to more of a catchment-based approach but not least looking at phosphate in isolation is really undesirable and unnecessary.
18. Gail thanked the group for sharing a copy of the report with the NMB representatives and said she was not aware that there was an agricultural group looking at this. Gail said the NMBs would welcome any closer involvement with either the Agricultural Task & Finish Group or the WLMF Sub Group.
19. Regarding the report, the first recommendation centred around advice and guidance. The NMBs are doing what we can in that area. We've undertaken some isolated projects such as a project called Phosphate Reduction and Mitigation (PRaM) that operated in the Teifi Catchment. That involved going out to predominantly small farms, which are typical in our rural areas and providing them with impartial advice. That was hugely beneficial and welcomed and often involved simple interventions like repairing broken guttering or diverting drainage from the yard. We had some money put aside for capital investment to pay for those. It was a relationship based on trust and trying to make improvements. We have an agricultural working group as well, but we are finding it difficult to attract actual farmers and land managers into those groups – it is a very difficult time for farmers right now and they need to know it's a trusted environment.
20. Regarding the recommendations on financial support and regulations, the NMBs would not disagree with those, but we have very limited ability to move those forward other than advocacy to Welsh Government.
21. Regarding data and evidencing, we're doing what we can such as the in-river monitoring. We've produced lots of risk and run off layers on GIS systems, but we can't

access Welsh Government or farmer-held data that we know would be useful in making decisions in the catchment.

22. Gail suggested that the final set of recommendations regarding research and innovation could have been bolder. This is a serious challenge for farmers and the environment and perhaps there are opportunities such as farm diversification and the circular economy. Perhaps that recommendation could dig a little bit deeper and look at market driven approaches and how farmers could be supported.
23. In general, Gail said NMBs are supportive of the report, but there's only so much we can do.
24. Ieuan Davies represents Bannau Brycheiniog and the Usk Catchment Partnership. He recently took on the role as the Project Manager for the partnership. There are a lot of crossovers with the outcomes that Gail has discussed and some similarities. However, we went about it in a slightly different way by developing the wider partnership. It was a priority to get that up and running and start to embed that way of working to try and engage stakeholders at the earliest opportunity. We've got some very active partners within the partnership already, for example The Wye and Usk Foundation, who are already embedded within the agricultural community in the Usk catchment. We've also been working closely with the Beacons Water Group who are a group of farmers implementing and delivering some of the outputs from the Welsh Government mitigation menu. That group is actively reaching out to the farming community to engage with more active farmers.
25. We've also been working with Atkins to develop a GIS portal, which will form the main part of the NMP. They are going to have developed a final draft by the end of the financial year. This tool will allow us to look at the high-risk areas and look at the relevant mitigation options associated with those high-risk areas. This will help us have early conversations with landowners and work with them to deliver interventions.
26. Ieuan mentioned that he worked on the SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group Report, as the Secretariat whilst working for NRW at the time. It was a really interesting report to work on and there was an awful lot of evidence reviewed by the group.
27. Bannau Brycheiniog and the Usk Catchment Partnership have also discussed the phosphate balance element as an actual usable technique that farmers can take on board and look at within their own nutrient management planning within their farm businesses. Advice and guidance are an especially important part of how things can be rolled out.
28. Regarding data and evidence, we've produced a report that has collated evidence for the Usk Catchment, this report also highlights several evidence gaps which we will be looking at addressing. Our report also discussed behaviour change and we are working with different areas of the community to understand their links to the agricultural community.
29. Regarding research and innovation, this is already happening within our catchment because of the likes of the Wye and Usk Foundation and the work of Beacons Water Group and the Mega Catchment. We're lucky that we can associate with that existing work.

30. Dennis recalled that Gail said that ideally phosphate wouldn't be the only nutrient the NMBs would look at and asked how the First Minister's Phosphate Summit chaired by Mark Drakeford comes into this work. Catherine Osborne, Welsh Government explained that Mark Drakeford set up the first phosphate Summit for SAC Rivers in July 2022 with the intention of unlocking housing and development due to phosphates. The summit process itself is currently going through a refresh and there is a possible intention for it to go much wider than phosphate by looking at general water quality. Our current Deputy First Minister is incredibly focused on delivery and activities, and there's a lot of work going on in the background. If the Summits do continue, then they are likely to be a mechanism where senior stakeholders commit to actions, instead of it being a talking shop. Regarding the NMBs, they're the regional specialists with the right people within those groups. NMBs met with our current Deputy First Minister in November, and the remit was for them to bring him a business case which identifies how the activities that they're asking for funding will deliver outputs which will then lead to outcomes. The Deputy First Minister asked that the NMBs are partially self funding going forward. Cathrine discussed the regulatory element and said the ask from Welsh Government is that if NMBs want regulatory change, then they need to provide fully developed requests. Additionally, if things need to go into the next programme for government, this is a great time to start looking at that.
31. Rachel Lewis-Davies, NFU Cymru said the governance around the phosphates issue with the various summits, Nutrient Management Boards, other groups etc has been really complex to engage with and perhaps it hasn't been properly resolved (e.g. who does what and at what level). This is a really important consideration as we move forward. We need to understand where certain things are best picked up. We also need to acknowledge the current policy landscape, certainly for farmers the future Sustainable Farming Scheme is one of those key levers for supporting the industry and driving the change we want to see. This is not necessarily something that needs to be considered in depth by NMBs or the phosphate Summit, but we do need clarity around the governance, the different groups and who does what. Rhys recalled previous discussions about the need for an organogram to clearly identify the relationship between different organisations and groups operating in this area, how they relate technically to each other. Marc Williams, NRW mentioned that he had started to highlight the links between different groups like the NMBs, the Wales Water Management Forum and this group. However, it was not progressed due to the complexity. Marc suggested he could revisit this, but timescales will be difficult as the SAC Rivers Project comes to an end in March 2025. Rhys acknowledged that there is probably a lot of work to be done before the end of March and suggested there's no rush for the organogram.

***AP 20<sup>th</sup> January 01: Marc Williams, NRW to look at creating an organogram to clearly identify the relationship between different organisations and groups working on phosphate issues in SAC Rivers.***

32. Catherine showed the group the internal Welsh Government structure to give an idea of where the links are between different departments.
33. Jon Goldsworthy, NRW introduced himself as the Teifi Demonstrator Project Manager. Jon agreed that the space is really complex. Anything that Welsh Government can do to streamline the governance would be really useful but the fact that there's so much interest in this area of work also provides an opportunity. Regarding the Teifi Demonstrator Project, we're trying to link into existing groups such as this one and the

NMB structure to not duplicate work but try to add value and take forward certain areas of work in a catchment project. The whole point of the Teifi Project was around trying new things, such as innovative ways of working, regulation or nature-based solutions. We have hit some blockers along the way, but we're doing our best to try and remove them. One of the main challenges is funding, so we're trying to look at alternative funding and have two applications in at the moment one for Ofwat Innovation money and one for a lottery bid. Jon said he read the report with interest and examined how the recommendations could be delivered amongst us. There are certainly aspects of this report and the recommendations that we might want to include in our Teifi funding application in terms of trialling within the catchment, improving data sets, the financial support and perhaps elements linked to regulation as well.

34. Gail said nutrients are so complex and affects planning, agriculture, biodiversity, water and so many different branches of various governmental and non-governmental organisations. That's been one of the barriers we've had in developing the plans, particularly around understanding the relevant groups are having discussions, such as this one. It's also difficult to know what interventions for what outcomes are being implemented in the catchments. NMBs are using it as an opportunity to talk about what holistic actions need to be considered so there'll be actions for Welsh Government and various different people to look at different ways of working. Gail offered to set up a separate chat with Catherine to discuss the structure a bit more.
35. David noted that Gail had mentioned that they were visiting farms to give impartial advice and that was welcomed. David said it was pleasing to know that the advice was welcomed, and presumably it compliments what is available through organisations like Farming Connect. David recalled that the NMBs are coming to the end of a three-year funding programme and asked what happens next. Gail reminded the group that Welsh Government have asked them to submit details of what we would like to do moving forward, how we think the NMBs could look and how they can best offer value. We are reliant on Welsh Government support for that, but we are also seeking other sources of funding, which is one of the reasons for looking at nature finance – how can we start to fill the nature-based solutions deficit in Wales in a way that works for the environment and communities. We are entirely reliant on funding, and we've been working really hard these last three years. We're evidencing and putting plans together and itching to get out and do more of the practical interventions such as those farm visits, buffer planting or even larger scale interventions such as wetlands. However, we need the right intervention in the right place. David said one of the key recommendations in the report under advice and guidance is that funding is made available to Farming Connect and or another organisation to provide the advice and guidance. Hopefully what the NMBs are doing complements what Farming Connect do rather than duplicate it. Perhaps a coordinated funding approach could be considered by Welsh Government.
36. David recalled earlier comments suggesting the research and innovation element of the report could have been bolder, David explained that the Task & Finish Group struggled with this and had some debate about how revolutionary to be with some of the recommendations. Diversification and market driven approaches were raised earlier, and David asked Gail to elaborate on that. Gail said that needs an agronomist or an agricultural specialist to answer fully, but it seems that we have an excess of nutrients in our SAC catchments and a deficit in others. We have this farcical situation where we are importing rock phosphate as a fertiliser, (which is not sustainable and has a huge carbon footprint) and at the same time we have an excess of it in some areas of Wales. The report references a lot of the work that's been undertaken by Gelli Aur and perhaps

that could go further, can it be looked at in a way that works for farmers, which makes good economic sense and starts to look towards more circular economy approaches. In terms of farm diversification, nature finance could potentially be an approach. David suggested that market driven approaches is covered in one of the recommendations that says 'provide funding for research and development of products and outcomes related to nutrient balancing and reducing P inputs'. We feel it is important that there is funding for research development for new technologies and new innovations that can help with nutrient balancing across the catchments.

37. Gail asked about the feedback received from farmers or the Farming Unions regarding the report and recommendations. David confirmed that the Farming Unions were represented on the on the Task & Finish Group and were coauthors of the report. Gail suggested that it would be nice to perhaps see a bit more detail of that report.
38. Sarah Jones, DCWW agreed with earlier comments regarding confusion around the different groups and called for better understanding of who does and at what level, the structure and what and how information is shared. DCWW is keen to collaborate but understanding what expertise to put into what group is really important. Sarah provided broad agreement of widening the scope away from phosphates. From a drinking water perspective, there are more parameters of concern and should be considered on a catchment basis as part of an active approach. Sarah asked if they will still be the Nutrient Management Board or is there scope to bring in other parameters such as emerging contaminants or other things like pesticides. Gail said we would like to move towards looking at those emerging threats before they become really difficult to solve. Sarah mentioned that there is another group called the Emerging Contaminants to Water Group in Welsh Government, which has DCWW representation.
39. Ieuan said the advice side of things is so important, but we don't want to duplicate work, but it is key that messages are consistent and supported by the same set of evidence.
40. Rachel acknowledged the interesting discussion and mentioned payment for ecosystem services, payment for public goods, natural capital – trying to turn this into realistic prospects that is able to support our rural communities is extremely challenging. Rachel recalled conversations from the last meeting around the SAGIS modelling and asked if the NMPs rely on any evidence or data from that modelling approach, particularly given the level of uncertainty from model outputs. Gail acknowledged that she wasn't privy to the previous conversation but recognised there are some uncertainties with SAGIS. Gail confirmed that the NMBs have used SAGIS to inform their NMPs but it comes with a recognition of uncertainty and precaution. Until we have a better understanding or a Farmscoper type tool that's suitable for Wales, that's what we're currently relying on. Ieuan confirmed that Bannau Brycheiniog and the Usk Catchment Partnership are also relying on that SAGIS. However, they are completely aware of those constraints in using the SAGIS modelling. We do need more on the ground data and we're fortunate that several of our partners have been working with farmers and have been able to collect some data. We're also aware that Welsh Government holds a lot of data – it would be amazing if that could be anonymized and used to make these models more robust. Ultimately, models are only as good as the data that is fed into them. Ieuan said the NMPs are living documents and will be updated as new evidence comes along.

41. Rhys asked if the draft plans are in the public domain for us to comment on and to provide feedback. Gail said they're not currently in the public domain, but for the three catchments in west Wales, the foundation of the plans was agreed and the evidence base was shared with all the key stakeholders including the Farming Unions. Unfortunately, we didn't get any written feedback from the agricultural sector, but all other members of the NMBs ratified the plans, and they were happy with the contents. Although there were some changes to be made. Rachel said it would be beneficial if those draft plans were circulated to this Sub Group. Rachel apologised if she had not had the opportunity to comment on a report and said the Sustainable Farming Scheme has dominated workstreams. If there's anything you want us to comment on via this group, then we certainly will make every effort to do so. Gail said she was happy to share the three west Wales catchment reports with this group but noted that they've advanced significantly since then. We're now working on the different action plans but if you're able to provide some timely feedback, which would be very welcome. Gail agreed to send copies of the documents to Bronwen to circulate.

***AP 20<sup>th</sup> January 02: Gail Pearce-Taylor to send copies of the three west Wales catchment reports to Bronwen Martin, NRW so that they can be shared with the group.***

***AP 20<sup>th</sup> January 03: Gail Pearce-Taylor to share a copy of the SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group Report with Nutrient Management Board stakeholders for awareness.***

42. Rachel asked Welsh Government if the Nutrient Trading Task and Finish Group report was published on the Welsh Government website. Catherine Osborne, Welsh Government said it was not published on the website, but it was shared with Senior Policy colleagues. The report was taken on board as part of the reinvented nutrient for biodiversity work and the Sustainable Investment Principles public consultation which closed in December. Rachel recalled there was an action relating to this group for Gareth Parry and herself to present on that report. However, they are reluctant to do so as key members of that group because it hasn't been published.

43. Einir Williams, Farming Connect mentioned that Farming Connect recently publicised their report based on over 3000 soil samples across Wales. The results are interesting and shows that we've got some work to do in terms of getting soil health to where it needs to be. Einir said she would share the reports with Bronwen to circulate to the group.

***AP 20<sup>th</sup> January 04: Einir Williams, Farming Connect to share links to the Farming Connect soil reports.***

44. Einir also mentioned that Farming Connect has been allocated further budget and are looking to run Agrisgôp groups again next year, as well as the advisory service. Stakeholder discussions are very welcome, because we've got the opportunity to work together on events or campaigns.

45. The group discussed potential ways in which they could help promote the SAC Rivers Agricultural Technical Group Report and how the recommendations might be prioritised.

## **Item 4. The Water Resources (Control of Agricultural Pollution) (Wales) Regulations 2021: 4-year review**

46. Dr Susannah Bolton, Independent Chair joined the meeting to provide a brief verbal update on the progress of the 4-year review. We are making good progress despite the very short timeframe. We've had some constructive engagement and received lots of material to work with. We are now working on the draft of the review and are on schedule with our plan for it to be published and available on the Welsh Government website by the 31st March. Susannah provided a caveat by saying that there's still a significant amount of work to do in the meantime and paid tribute to colleagues in Welsh Government for supporting the process.
47. Susannah reminded the group that reviewing the available evidence really provides us with clear indication as to the effectiveness of the regulation. However, we do have some significant limitations and constraints, not least the fact that the Regulation was phased and much of the implementation has been too recent for it to generate any significant change. The stakeholder engagement that we have done has been a very important part of the process and this will certainly be reflected and acknowledged.
48. Rhys asked if Susannah needed anything further from the group. Susannah said there may be some small follow-ups needed, but we're now at the business end of getting our findings reflected as succinctly and clearly as possible. Rhys thanked Susannah for engaging with this group and acknowledged her hard work on producing this report.
49. Dennis Matheson, TFA said we're very pleased that Welsh Government have decided that if tenants can't comply with any of the Universal Actions in the coming support scheme, they won't have to do it, and that includes the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulation. Dennis discussed the challenges of working on a reasonable and realistic solution. Susannah acknowledged the difficult situation in certain circumstances for tenants and thanked Dennis for discussing these issues with her.

## **Item 5. Any Other Business**

50. The next meeting will be held on Monday 24th February 2025. This meeting will be focused on the SAGIS modelling presentation.
51. Members are encouraged to suggest potential agenda items and discussion topics, please forward them to Bronwen Martin, NRW.
52. No other business was raised.