

PRESS RELEASE 13/11/17

Release: Immediate

Agroforestry is the new game-changer for UK agriculture

At a recent meeting with representatives from the Farm Woodland Forum (the UK's agroforestry forum), Farming Minister George Eustice MP, expressed a keen commitment to include agroforestry in future domestic Agricultural Policy post Brexit.

The ministerial meeting comes at a time when agroforestry farming systems are receiving considerable recognition for their economic, environmental and livestock welfare benefits across Europe. This is reflected in a new European-funded research project called AFINET (AgroForestry Innovation NETworks) which is being led in the UK by the Organic Research Centre and Abacus Agriculture.

AFINET has attracted 2,000,000 Euros under the European Commission's H2020 programme. Involving 13 partners from nine European regions. The project aims to promote agroforestry implementation throughout Europe by improving knowledge on the management and design of agroforestry systems.

Dr Jo Smith, from the Organic Research Centre who is leading AFINET in the UK with Abacus Agriculture in collaboration with the Farm Woodland Forum* said, "In 2016 the UK missed its target for planting woodland by 93% and we rank the lowest for woodland density in Europe. However, this figure could be significantly reduced by incorporating agroforestry into the farmed landscape "

Dr Smith continues, "The UK currently undervalues agroforestry although there is substantial potential to be unleashed in terms of climate change, enhancing biodiversity and improving water quality. Agroforestry also offers considerable welfare benefits for livestock and can help to keep agriculture competitive. We have been impressed by the interest in agroforestry by farmers in the UK, but there are knowledge gaps that that we need to resolve. Our new AFINET project aims to bridge these gaps to help farmers overcome perceived obstacles to agroforestry for the benefit of their farming business, environment and productivity."

Stephen Briggs, from Abacus Agriculture attended the meeting with George Eustice together with Mike Strachan and Dr Paul Burgess representing the Farm Woodland Forum* and said, "Our meeting with the Minister was extremely positive. Coming from a farming family in Cornwall he could appreciate the benefits of incorporating trees into agricultural production and he showed a genuine desire to look at ways to

join up forestry and agroforestry. In the past this has fallen down a crack in the middle and government recognises that the current agri-environment framework stifles innovation in this field. However, we do need to develop workable business models for agroforestry to increase its adoption by the farming community. The AFINET project will act as a catalyst to do this.”

The newly launched EU AFINET project proposes an innovative approach by setting up Regional Agroforestry Innovation Networks (RAINS). These are working groups formed by a balanced representation of farmers, foresters, government services and advisers who will gather together to share their knowledge and experiences about agroforestry to increase and improve current uptake.

Dr Smith said, “Agroforestry in the UK offers great potential and we already have some fantastic examples of farmers that have developed successful, innovative and profitable agroforestry projects on their land. We know that there are lots of people out there who are interested but they don’t know where to start. This is an ideal opportunity to get all these people together to share experiences and expertise and start the ball rolling.”

In the meantime, the Organic Research Centre and Abacus Agriculture will be setting up a UK RAIN with a series of practical stakeholder events to discuss and learn from each other. These events will be held on farms and will focus on gathering together existing expertise, identifying gaps, promoting innovative practices and finding solutions.”

Dr Smith and Stephen Briggs will be speaking at an on-farm agroforestry event at the GWCT Allerton Project farm at Loddington, Leicestershire on 23rd November. The event, being run in conjunction with the Woodland Trust will highlight this ground-breaking agroforestry project that has been established on the farm with funding made available through the Woodland Trust.

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For more information, or images please contact: Morag Walker on mobile: 07736 124097 or morag@moragwalkerpr.co.uk

Notes to editors

The Organic Research Centre (ORC): established in 1980, is the UK’s leading independent research centre for the development of organic/agroecological food production and land management solutions to key global issues including climate change, soil and biodiversity conservation, and food security. www.organicresearchcentre.com

For information on AFINET, please visit: www.agroforestry.eu/AFINET

***The Farm Woodland Forum:** aims to facilitate the generation and exchange of information that supports best practice in and improves opportunities for farming with trees. We are an informal group of about 220 people with a common interest in farming with trees in all its aspects. Until 2003, we were known as the UK Agroforestry Forum. www.agroforestry.ac.uk



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