

## UNITED KINGDOM

Promoting  
knowledge and  
improving human  
potential

**Location**  
Scotland

**Programming period**  
2007 - 2013

**Axis / Priority**  
Axis 1 – Improving the  
competitiveness of the  
agricultural and forestry  
sector

**Measure**  
M1.1 vocational training and  
skills acquisition actions, &  
M1.2 demonstration activities  
and information actions

**Funding (EUR)**  
Total budget 121 000  
RDP 75 000  
Private 46 000

**Project duration**  
2014 – 2015

**Project promoter**  
Scottish Enterprise

**Contact**  
Jackie Green  
[jacqueline.green@scotent.co.uk](mailto:jacqueline.green@scotent.co.uk)  
tel. +44 (0)1750 726518

**Website**  
[www.goruralforbusiness.com/  
monitor-farm/the-farms](http://www.goruralforbusiness.com/monitor-farm/the-farms)

Agritourism Monitor Farms are businesses opened up to wider community groups, consisting of other rural tourism businesses and related professionals, where issues are discussed in a practical way, involving site tours, working groups and open discussions.

### Summary

The original concept of Monitor Farms is that they are farmer-led initiatives to improve the performance and profitability of a farm, typical of the local area, over three year period. To date the model has been used at over 40 Monitor Farms across Scotland.



The agritourism Monitor Farms are run on the same principals but are running over a shorter time span of 18 months, due to the funding cycle of the 2007-2013 RDP. In this project, two Monitor Farms were supported by a facilitator and Management Group. Activities carried out included the delivery of 18 meetings, the creation and facilitation of a Management Group for each farm and business development and facilitation to the wider monitor farm community groups.

### Results

More than 90% of participants stated that their involvement in the project helped improve productivity.

Among local farmers who regularly attend Monitor Farm meetings, 95% said Monitor Farms were an effective forum for exchanging knowledge and almost 60% reported that Monitor Farm projects led to improvements in the financial performance of their own farm businesses.

One of the agritourism Monitor Farms reports an increase of 50% year on year in turnover, which can at least in part be attributed to their involvement in the project.

Those who work in the business have gained in confidence and in understanding that they have 'real' businesses which need to be treated as such.

### Lessons & Recommendations

- ☐ If possible run the Monitor Farm for three years, rather than the shorter 18 months. This allows for the business to grow which will provide better year-on-year comparisons.
- ☐ It is important to recognise that the pre-launch phase can be lengthy and ensure that there is enough time built into the project for preparation.
- ☐ It is important that all roles are clearly defined and understood by all members of the project team.
- ☐ Identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) right at the beginning of the project to allow efficient measurement of the changes in the businesses.
- ☐ Like most projects, be prepared to take advantage of unexpected circumstances that may arise during the project life cycle. They may be of great benefit to the project although not included in the original budget.

## Context

The original Scottish Monitor Farm programme began in 2003, following a model developed in New Zealand as part of an effort to help farmers' recovery from the aftermath of Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001-02. Through evaluation the Monitor Farm programme was seen to be a very successful model. Feedback from the industry suggested that it could provide benefits in wider settings.

A scoping study carried out in 2013 in Scotland provided evidence and demonstrated the demand for the benefits Agritourism Monitor Farms could bring.

## Objectives

The aims of the project were to:

- Improve the business performance and tourism offer of the two agritourism Monitor Farms;
- Encourage participation by a wider group of businesses and professionals to improve all of their businesses.

The intention was that this would lead to measurable improvements in both the Monitor Farm businesses and the wider group's rural tourism businesses.

## Activities

The concept of an agritourism Monitor Farm is that the business is opened up to a wider community group, consisting of other rural tourism businesses and other related professionals. The Monitor Farmer agrees to host regular group meetings at their business's premises, where subjects are discussed in a practical way, involving site tours, working groups and open discussion. There are also annual Open Days.

The agritourism Monitor Farm project started in winter 2013 with a search for a facilitator and suitable agritourism businesses and finished in September 2015. The process to become an agritourism Monitor Farm was a competitive one with 11 farms applying. The aim when choosing the successful Monitor Farms was to get divergent businesses in order to explore as broad a range of experience as possible. This would provide the greatest learning from the project and the value of the shared results would be higher. A critical part of the selection process was the drive and enthusiasm displayed by the business owners.

The project was supported by a Facilitator, a Project Supervisor and Project Manager, Management Group and

the "Core 20". There were nine meetings held at each business over the 18 month period with one open meeting held each year.

The Facilitator's role was to support the Monitor Farms by providing advice on objective setting, data analysis and management of all the meetings. This included developing the content and sourcing experts to share their knowledge. Previous Monitor Farms have seen the rewards from having the highest quality facilitators driving the projects forward. The facilitation role was supported by the Management Group and Scottish Enterprise.

The Management Group was made up of experienced local business people and public agencies with expertise in the tourism sector. The main roles of the Management Group are to ensure the meeting topics are relevant to the specific Monitor Farm and wider attendees; support the facilitator in organising these meetings and their content; and helping to spread the project benefits to the wider economy. The Management group provided a wide variety of valuable knowledge and experience which can help add value to the project. Working with experienced individuals can help build the confidence and networks of those involved.

The "Core 20" consisted of agritourism businesses committed to attending all of the Monitor Meetings at the two Monitor Farms (10 businesses per Monitor Farm). These 20 businesses were given additional support by meeting four times ahead of the main Monitor Farm meetings to discuss how to improve their own business performance.



Peel farm outlet



Peel farm accommodation

## The monitoring businesses

The two businesses chosen were 'Peel Farm' and 'Laggan Farm', in very different parts of Scotland and very different businesses. Peel Farm is located in Angus in the north east, close to larger towns and cities, whereas Laggan Farm is located in Dumfries & Galloway in south west Scotland, a much more rural and sparsely populated area. Both Monitor Farms highlighted the opportunities and challenges of managing complex tourism businesses while also running productive farming enterprises.

The two businesses are also very different in what they have to offer; Peel Farm consists of a coffee shop, retail units, on-farm self-catering accommodation and a small-scale food production unit. The structure of the farm shop business is unusual in Scotland as the coffee shop, retail area and production kitchen are rented out to a third party.

At Laggan Farm the agritourism part of the business consists of adventure sports venture run through the Laggan Outdoor brand which includes one of the UK's longest zip wires, zorbing, grass sledging, archery and other adrenaline activities. The family also have a well-established caravan park and self-catering chalet accommodation next to the sea which is run as a separate business. There is also a café serving home produce.

The core of the project was based around the nine meetings held at each monitor farm. Initial 'First Impressions Count' meetings were held and from this the following nine meeting themes emerged. The intention was that the topics reflected the issues faced at each monitor farm and are designed as bespoke events.

At Peel Farm meetings focused on:

- the new accommodation
- the Peel Brand
- farm shop benchmarking

Meetings at Laggan Farm focused on:

- Improving the business performance of the cafe;
- Making Money from Renewables
- Tourism and other businesses working together to drive customers to each other's businesses

Meetings that have been delivered at both monitor farms as they are relevant to both businesses were:

- Succession Planning,
- Pricing Strategy
- Digital technology

Reports were produced for each of the meetings which are available on the Monitor Farm website for the general public.



## Main Results

Evidence from the Scottish Government's Scottish Monitor Farm Programme Evaluation 2009-13 found that *"the vast majority of monitor farmers described their involvement in the project to be of significant value to their own businesses, with 93% stating their involvement in the project helped improve productivity."*

It also revealed the value to the local farmers who regularly attend Monitor Farm meetings, the 'Core 20'. Of this group, 95% said Monitor Farms were an effective forum for exchanging knowledge and almost 60% reported that Monitor Farm projects led to improvements in the financial performance of their own farm businesses.

One of the agritourism Monitor Farms reported an increase of 50% year on year in turnover, which can at least in part be attributed to their involvement in the project. Both businesses felt they benefitted phenomenally from their involvement, allowing them to focus 'on their businesses' rather than purely working 'in their businesses'. The process encouraged them, in some cases, to make changes and restructure in such a way as to allow them to move towards the goals and aspirations they have for the businesses in the future. The topics covered at the meetings and the access to the knowledge and advice of experts, as well as fellow tourism businesses, was extremely valuable in providing tools to grow and expand their businesses.

Those who work in the business have gained in confidence and in understanding that they have 'real' businesses which need to be treated as such. Both have seen the direction of their businesses change and develop over the last 12 months as new opportunities and networks have opened up to them. By scrutinising their businesses they are able to put the processes in place which are intended to increase profitability and sustainability. The networking between the wider group has provided new business opportunities and reduced the feeling of working in isolation.

## Lessons & Recommendations

If possible run the Monitor Farm for three years, rather than the shorter 18 months. This allows for the business to grow which will provide better year-on-year comparisons. It also allows for more time between meetings, giving proper time for development of content and allowing meetings to have a longer lead time to ensure high participation rates. In addition results of the project will be clearer after three years.

It is important to recognise that the pre-launch phase can be lengthy and ensure that there is enough time built into the project for preparation. It is vitally important to recruit the right people for the project e.g. facilitator, group members and management group, and this can take time. In sparsely populated areas attracting the numbers of relevant business people may be challenging. Consider whether the term 'agritourism' may lead to some rural tourism businesses ruling themselves out of becoming involved as they are not farm related.

It is important that all roles are clearly defined and understood by all members of the project team. It is helpful to highlight where the different roles add value to the Monitor Farm project.

Identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) right at the beginning of the projects to allow measurement of the changes in the businesses. This may be considered

challenging by the Monitor Farms in the early stages of the project, however it is worth pursuing as when confidence is built later on the benefits of being able to monitor the changes become more apparent. To have the highest value in improving the performance of the agritourism business, it is important that the KPIs are agreed with the individual business and relevant to that specific business/sector - not generic indicators applied to all.

Be aware that, like most projects, unexpected circumstances will arise during the project life cycle which may be of great benefit to the project, but not included in the original budget. If possible build in an element of 'contingency funding' to the project budget to allow flexibility to take advantage of the unexpected and unplanned situations.

Use the existing knowledge and experience from previous Monitor Farm projects. Learn the lessons of the previous projects, acknowledge the differences and take suggestions for changes on board. Good buy-in from National and Regional governments is very valuable as they help raise the profile of the Monitor Farm projects and share the knowledge and experiences more widely.

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### Additional sources of information

- [www.goruralforbusiness.com/monitor-farm/the-farms](http://www.goruralforbusiness.com/monitor-farm/the-farms)
- [www.scottish-enterprise.com](http://www.scottish-enterprise.com)
- Peel Farm: Kim Gall and Claire Flemming [www.peelfarm.com](http://www.peelfarm.com)
- Laggan Farm: Duncan McConchie [www.lagganoutdoor.co.uk](http://www.lagganoutdoor.co.uk)