





Case Study - Beech Hill Farm

Company Background

Set in the Sussex High Weald Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB), Beech Hill Farm is an organically (non-certified) run 20-acre smallholding. The farm rears livestock and produces flowers, vegetables, fruit and home-grown lamb, largely serving site needs. Accommodation and studio space are diversifications supporting the farm as part of a sustainable facility.

Summary of Key Achievements

- The farm saved £1,464 in 2003 through sustainable energy, water and waste initiatives 
- The farm is significantly involved in the Government's 'Paths to Prosperity' programme 
- Networking initiatives and imminent website design with local organic enterprises help to support the local region and Anglo-French farm-based tourism 
- Rare breed Longwools are stocked, and their fleece/meat capabilities promoted 
- Natural biodiversity is encouraged with native hedges and specifically designed wildlife habitats 
- East Sussex Business Through Resource Efficiency (BETRE) is promoting the farm as an example of best environmental practice 
- Opportunities for volunteers are provided through World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) 

KEY



The Studio - a venue for community workshops

A small stock of registered pedigree rare breed Wensleydale Longwools are kept and bred. Best practice in their fleece production with small mills and spinners in the South East is also shared.

Contribution to a Sustainable Economy

Julia Desch, the farm owner, founded the High Weald Bridleways Group in 1992 to improve off-road access to bridleways. As project manager, Julia, in collaboration with The Tourism Company led a study, which proved to the local council that bridleways were critical to the growing farm-based economy. The report initiated the council's 'Path to Prosperity' programme, which involves £1.5 million funding over three years, with 60% allocated to bridleways. Further to this study, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has now conducted a national study into the importance of the UK equestrian industry.

Julia is developing a website, due to be launched in spring 2005, that supports small local organic sustainable enterprises. There are currently seven interested companies each will have a web page on the site with links to their own company sites. Participating companies have to meet certain sustainable criteria to join.

Sustainability Initiatives

The farm strives to support local organic enterprises through numerous networking and volunteering initiatives.

Energy efficiency and recycling are practised and promoted to minimise the farm's environmental footprint, as well as reduce running costs.

Julia regularly meets other Sussex/Kent Wensleydale Longwool breeders to promote high quality end products through the sharing of ideas, information and stock with other farms; this entails combining fibre for production, researching worsted production facilities, and general networking. The group is working with small mills and spinning groups to extend the business and reduce overheads. Rare breeds are costly to keep at about £200 per sheep. The group has found its co-ordinated efforts to be of great benefit and value, particularly in the current difficult market conditions.

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Julia has identified a need to improve the fleece washing process to help local mills meet capacity. She is planning to experiment with micro-organisms, which, if successful, could contribute significantly to reducing waste, water and time.

High Weald also has a farm studio which was constructed with the help of a grant from SEEDA. It is used to host a variety of functions, including local art workshops, retreats, and 'touch' workshops for partially sighted people.

Beech Hill Farm is part of the Natural Discovery Initiative and is a member of various specialist holiday websites, such as www.organicholidays.com

The farm strives to use local suppliers whenever possible, and considers the environmental impact of goods and products when purchasing. Visitors to the farm are given 'Food on your doorstep' information and informed about local pubs and public transport in order to reduce unnecessary travel and support the local economy where possible.

Enhancing Environmental Quality

Beech Hill Farm has saved a total of £1,464 in 2003 through several environmental initiatives, as summarised below.

The installation of a rainwater harvesting system in March 2004 has saved the farm up to £500 annually and 500m³/year of water. The £3,000 cost of installation was assisted by a £1,000 Green Action Award from East Sussex Business Through Resource Efficiency (BETRE), a not-for-profit environmental education company. Water harvested can be used for flower and vegetable production, watering livestock and cleaning the yard. Also, fleece production requires up to 180 litres of water per fleece. A system of tanks, pipes and sprinklers has been installed for these purposes.

Water is also conserved by the placement of bricks in all five toilet cisterns to reduce their flush volumes, saving approximately 11m³ of mains water annually.

A solar water heating system has been in operation since 1996. The system has halved the CO₂ emissions of the farm, as well as the cost per annum of oil from £1,400 to approximately £700. Julia is currently approaching SolarSense to apply for a wind solar system grant, which would give the farm energy independence and the opportunity to contribute to the national grid.

Wood burners, sourced by the farms' sustainable wood supply through incremental growth and fallen trees, are used to heat the main building. In interim months this process is CO₂ neutral. Ash from the burning process is used to enrich the gardens.

Heat loss has been minimised by installing high specification insulation to the main building's roof and walls, as well as double glazing, secondary glazing, and draught proofing throughout.

Energy efficient light bulbs have been fitted throughout the farm, saving approximately £287 per year in electricity bills, and 2.5 tonnes in annual CO₂ emissions.

Soil in the flower and vegetable beds is reconditioned through the kitchen and agricultural waste compost. Living Soil composting containing micro-organisms is in place. Waste left over from Longwool spinning is used for bird nests, packaging and to make felted cushions. Overall waste from the farm is minimal and complies with the recent Farm Waste Regulations.

All glass, plastic, paper and cans are recycled offsite. Visitors are asked to sort their waste and are given maps showing the nearest recycling facilities. Alternatively, a service is provided by staff which does this for them.

An ongoing programme of tree and hedge planting, and careful land management (e.g. 'wigwams' of stacked logs providing habitats for small mammals) encourages biodiversity. Natural predators of agricultural pests benefit organic farming, and the attractive surroundings draw visitors.

The farm has two rare breeds of Black Wensleydale Longwool and Black/White Crosses that produce the finest 'lustre mohair' in the world, in addition to its skins for rugs. The farm hopes that protecting stock and high quality end products with others will encourage new flock keepers.

Improving the Social Wellbeing of Stakeholders

For five years Beech Hill Farm has operated within the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) scheme, dedicated to providing volunteer opportunities to work on organic farms internationally and learn sustainable skills. Since February 2004, Beech Hill Farm has received 24 volunteers, involving 100 days teaching time about alternative energy and the farms sustainable practices. A WWOOF beginners course has been piloted. So far 24 volunteers have expressed interest. It is hoped that the variety of hands-on learning will provide host farms with more experienced volunteers and produce an information pack for others to encourage running similar courses.

BETRE has recognised Beech Hill Farm as an example of good practice and was included in a newsletter illustrating environmental policy which included a case study and was distributed to 4,000 regional businesses.



Black Wensleydale Long Wool sheep with one of the farm's 'wigwams': a construction of logs intended to encourage small mammals

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