



SME CASE STUDY VIGNETTE NO. 3

East Hall Farm

<https://www.easthallfarm.com/>

01 | Introduction

Easthall Farm aims to grow quality food while having a positive impact on the environment. The business includes 244 hectares of arable land, 114 hectares of meadows and grass fields, 222 hectares of arable land temporarily left for wildlife and some woodland. The main crops consist of wheat, beans and oats, sold to companies such as Jordans and Weetabix, among others. Other income streams include contracts for conservation work and beef cattle. Easthall is a family business, down multiple generations. It is located in North Hertfordshire on the east side of the Chiltern Hills.



As farmers, we grow high-quality food, but we do so in a way that minimises environmental impact. We are members of Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), gaining accreditation to their LEAF Marque status, and have been selected to be one of the 40 farms in the Jordans Farm Partnership, supplying oats to the cereal makers, while maintaining very high environmental standards. We are in the Higher Tier within Defra's Countryside Stewardship.



02 | Environmental reporting

Easthall is the first farm in the UK to be accredited as a B Crop. This requires reporting on social and environmental impacts. The farm also has the LEAF Marque accreditation requiring additional reporting.

The farm has been exploring a range of payments for ecosystem services with large part of the enterprise being Countryside Stewardship requiring detailed reporting of habitat creation and maintenance. The farm is also involved in carbon sequestration and has been carefully measuring the baseline of soil carbon with future expected payments for carbon that is surplus once all the business' own emissions are offset.

As part of the Jordans Farm Partnership, there is a need to report on wildlife habitat creation to gain a premium on oats sold. The farm has a system of reporting on biodiversity and sustainability more generally as this is part of its core mission. Elements of this are also used to report to Countryside Stewardship and for contracts with Jordans. Banks have never asked for information on biodiversity but asked the farm to send a copy of the carbon footprint reports.

“To evaluate the effectiveness of the soil management practices, we have improved our soil data. These are built on a 400-sample baseline across the farm, measured down to 60cm depth to see the long-term impact”. Assessments of soil biodiversity are done using three types of worms as indicators species of overall soil health. The soil monitoring is done by volunteer conservation groups covering key sites that are visited annually or every two years.

Surveys of flora are carried out by the Wildlife Trust who visit each of the County Wildlife Sites on the farm approximately every ten years. These explore the diversity of species on each key site but not abundance. Further flora surveys have been carried out as part of an experiment on cattle grazing examining the mob grazing approach that the farm has been pioneering for the past decade. This allows grass and other plants to grow to flowering between each grazing.

Wider impacts on biodiversity are recorded through changes to habitats. There are new areas of tree planting, hedge planting, grassland margins around fields, creation of herbal-rich leys, and provision of plots for wild bird feeding in winter. These are planted in summer and left to allow seed and other food for birds in winter. This is complemented by the provision of four tons of bird seed from December to April. Bird life is monitored by volunteer ornithologists who have been involved in recording birds on the farm as part of the British Trust for Ornithology national surveys. Additional surveys have been set up with four additional transects established that are surveyed four times a year. The extent to which data on these quarterly surveys can be used to show changes from year to year. The conservation volunteer group also conduct surveys of butterflies each month on the four transects.



Monitoring of bats has identified a range of species with surveys focusing on areas where there are maternity roosts of Barbastelle, one of the rarest bats in the UK. This has found that the largest mainland UK maternity roosts are found on Easthall Farm.

03 | External Financing

External financing of biodiversity has come predominantly from Countryside Stewardship which is part of the public funding through the Environmental Land Management Schemes. This started with the first 10-year contract in 2000, the second contract in 2010, and a new 5-year contract in 2020. With new opportunities coming from the government’s recent Sustainable Farming Incentive, the latest contract has been enlarged to cover more biodiversity outcomes.



A small amount of income for biodiversity has come from the 'insetting' Jordans Farm Partnership, which paid a £12 premium on each ton of oats sold. In future, the farm may consider financing from Biodiversity Net Gain payments, although this is still in its early stages, and the areas to be allocated for a change in land use towards rewilded areas are relatively small.

[The Jordans Farm Partnership - Jordans Cereal \(jordanscereals.co.uk\)](https://jordanscereals.co.uk)

The farm has relied on bank lending to invest in farming and diversification activities. The bank has not been able to offer any incentive or support for biodiversity improvement activities. The

biodiversity investments are funded through overdraft payments with annual revenue received from the government for Countryside Stewardship payments.

04 | Good practice

The farm has accreditation as a B Corp with the process requiring an assessment of the biodiversity surveys. The farm is also accredited with the LEAF Marque which required completing an annual sustainable farming review and passing an inspection to ensure good practice.

By opening access to volunteer groups, the farm has been able to benefit from detailed surveys by highly experienced ecologists, particularly of the birds and bats and, to a lesser degree, moths. The conservation volunteer group set up by the farm has been instrumental in increasing the ability to survey more broadly but this is limited to butterflies.

The farm has been seeking to get a premium from buyers of arable crops and beef cattle, but this has been limited to a small and declining premium from Jordan's oats buyers.

05 | Benefits of environmental reporting

Current environmental reporting for Countryside Stewardship is based solely on areas of habitat created. This requires annual reporting with evidence. The volunteer groups are measuring the prevalence of different species but measuring abundance is much harder. The surveys of bats were able to estimate minimum populations by catching bats in mist nets, attaching radio tags with fall-off after a few days, then using this to locate maternity roosts and counting the numbers of bats using these sites. Bird surveys are carried out quarterly on the same transects with details of bird diversity identified and limited numbers of abundance. However, there are a range of factors that can affect this and so changes over time are hard to ascertain.

Future solutions for this might come from having technology-based approaches to monitor birds using acoustic surveys done every week as part of the current farming and conservation activities. Similarly, surveys of meadows could also use plant identification software collected as farm staff walk meadows. This would require AI systems to identify species diversity and abundance and support in analysing the results.

06 Growth scale-up plans,

Easthall aims to scale up by increasing its conservation impacts while growing quality food. As a multigenerational business, there has been a tradition of planning for the long term. Rather than the focus of business growth each quarter, Easthall has business planning for decades, with a focus on scaling up impacts and consideration of biodiversity, protecting the landscape and social impacts, alongside running a commercial business.

The farm is looking for ways to use the data on biodiversity to open new opportunities for nature-friendly product markets. These would be paying a premium and allow the farm to add more value to produce. It also aims to increase resilience by diversifying its income and investing in converting redundant farm buildings for other purposes, especially those that meet its environmental and social aims. Finance for these developments comes from its own reserves complemented by bank lending to help with short term cashflow. The biodiversity measurements will continue with further measurement activity where interest from wildlife support organisations and volunteers, or where required to enter new markets for 'wildlife premium' based products.

Support is currently coming from independent agricultural advisers who have helped with the large conservation contracts to deliver conservation as part of the government supported Environmental Land Management Schemes. Advice is also received from conservation NGOs for increasing the benefit to biodiversity. Future support needs include advice on accessing Biodiversity Net Gain contracts with developers and other forms of contracts paying for ecosystem services provided.

ABOUT

Funded by the Natural Environment Research Council, our case study series sheds light on early-stage SMEs journeys in obtaining external financing, SMEs navigating challenges in accessing finance for nature-positive innovation, aligning with environmentally conscious investors through shared metrics, and the evolution of SME investors in becoming 'nature-positive'. For further details, please see www.cusp.ac.uk/sme-finbio.