



Countryside and Community Research Institute

The Benefits of LEAF Membership: a qualitative study to understand the added value that LEAF brings to its farmer members.

Key Findings

**Conducted by Jane Mills, Nick Lewis and Janet Dwyer,
CCRI.**

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Background

Since its formation in 1991, LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) has grown into a large organisation with 1,600 farmer members across the whole of the UK, as well as a growing overseas membership.

There is much evidence, both anecdotal and from recent membership surveys, which suggests that farmer members derive both **financial and non-financial benefits from belonging to LEAF**, in direct and indirect ways. In September 2010, LEAF commissioned the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) to obtain some more detailed, independent evidence to show the nature and scale of the benefits of LEAF membership to UK farmers.

For the methodology, please refer to Appendix A.

Key Findings

It pays to be a LEAF member, and the environment and local communities benefit too.

Financial Benefits

LEAF farmer membership had resulted in **significant financial benefits** to farmers in relation to on-farm cost savings, additional income, market benefits and adherence with regulatory requirements.

On-farm cost savings arose through the implementation of IFM principles and the use of the LEAF Audit, for example:

- Reductions in fertiliser and chemical inputs had saved costs in the range of £2,500 - £10,000 per year, per farm;
- Energy efficiency: through completing the LEAF Audit, reduced fuel costs for field operations had had a large financial impact on members' farms;
- Several farms reported LEAF membership "drove them faster" to look at more efficient water use, leading to significant cost savings, up to £14,000 a year on one farm;
- Livestock farmers had noticed improvements in animal health in some cases resulting in up to 10% cost savings for disease treatments.

Significant additional income can be derived from LEAF farmer membership, for example:

- Hosting LEAF Demonstration Farm Events and visits or hosting Open Farm Sunday resulted in increased revenue of £2,000-7,000 per year, per farm;
- Increased direct sales of farm produce to the public resulting from members hosting both Open Farm Sunday and Demonstration Farm events;
- Agri-environment scheme income: For 35% of the members surveyed, LEAF farmer membership was felt to be a contributory factor in gaining entry into a Higher-Level agri-environment scheme, which often brought significant additional income to the farm;
- Other on-farm activities: LEAF farmer membership had improved the environmental credentials of some members which had positively contributed to their income from diversification into on-farm tourism and training provision.

LEAF Marque accreditation can be essential for members in securing valued supermarket contracts, retaining existing customers or commanding a premium price for products.

- Maintaining Contracts: For some members becoming LEAF Marque-accredited had ensured the continuation of valuable supply contracts;
- Retention of Business: 50% of those LEAF Marque =-accredited members interviewed reported that even where accreditation was not a requirement for their customers, they felt it had helped them to retain their business contracts.

A reduced regulatory cost: 54% of the members surveyed considered LEAF farmer membership to contribute to easier compliance with regulatory requirements.

- Many feel that it offers 'peace of mind', in that if you are meeting LEAF standards then you can be confident that you are doing what the regulations require, and more;
- Others say that it helps them to keep ahead of the regulatory requirements: "When it comes to conforming to regulations...it means we are ahead of it...we've certainly addressed the issues even if we haven't solved them before any regulations become statutory... certainly with pesticide... we were already going through the processes, so we didn't have to make a massive change";
- Inspections: several members believed that they may have been subjected to fewer inspections by regulators as a result of LEAF farmer membership. "They inspect by risk and if you are LEAF-accredited you are probably going to drop down the list".

Environmental Benefits

LEAF farmer membership has **developed farmers' knowledge** of the environment as well as **enhancing biodiversity**, soil and water.

- For 86% of those interviewed, LEAF farmer membership has increased their awareness and understanding of the farm environment. For some, the change is noted as 'transformational', affecting their whole attitude to farming.

"I'm sure it has helped change my attitude and helped cement some of those ideas in my head. It has progressed my attitude to the environment, rather than let it get stale".

Although it is generally a difficult task to link biodiversity directly to certain farming activities, 49% of those surveyed could link biodiversity benefits directly with their LEAF farmer membership, for example:

- Increased bird populations on some farms were considered to be due to farm management and field operations following IFM principles, as opposed to any specific conservation activities carried out under agri-environment schemes.
- Visible benefits to soil structure, water quality and water quantity were identified as direct benefits from LEAF farmer membership.

Social Benefits

LEAF farmer membership had **significantly enhanced the social aspects of farming**, for farmer members, including increased skills and better relations with other farmers and the local community, as well as the chance to improve the image and understanding of farming among the wider public.

- Skills, training and communication: 86% percent of members surveyed reported that LEAF farmer membership had improved their, or their employees', skills and knowledge base
- The greatest personal impact was on members' communication skills, particularly as a result of 'Speak Out' training. LEAF had significantly improved members' confidence in explaining their farm businesses to the general public.

“LEAF has had a big impact on my communication skills. I am often asked to talk to groups and feel confident in doing this now”.

- Increased social interaction: LEAF farmer membership was reported to increase farmers’ interaction with neighbours (49%) and other farmers more generally (71%). This arose from hosting events on the farm and attending LEAF events. Members noted that increased networking and contacts may bring benefits to the business, in due course.
- Better community relations: 77% of those interviewed felt they had more contact with the general public as a result of LEAF farmer membership, primarily from hosting Open Farm Sunday events or school visits. Most reported that hosting public events on their farm, conducting local talks and opening the farm to the public improved relations with the local community.
- Better understanding: 91% of members interviewed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that LEAF farmer membership had “improved understanding among the local community”.
 - Members felt they were seen as more ‘approachable’, this increased people’s appreciation and tolerance of farming practices and improved public understanding, for example, of the importance of keeping to footpaths.
 - “People have found us more approachable, people will stop and talk and have a look over the fence at the cows”.

Relating the findings of this survey with those of previous LEAF member surveys

In 2008 and Spring 2010, LEAF conducted online membership surveys which drew much larger, and therefore more statistically representative, numbers of responses to a range of more general questions about the benefits of LEAF farmer membership. The general findings in the previous LEAF surveys were largely supported by the findings of this study, with a high degree of consistency, suggesting that the benefits identified in this more focused study group are generally shared across the membership.

- **Financial benefits:** more than half of farmer members in the earlier surveys agreed that LEAF had brought them **direct financial benefits**.

- **Environmental:** Over three-quarters of respondents considered LEAF farmer membership and IFM principles to have **improved their environmental performance** in the 2008 and 2010 member surveys. Similarly, 77% of respondents in this study agreed that LEAF farmer membership and IFM practices brought improved biodiversity and landscape.
- **Social:** This study showed a much higher proportion of members agreeing that LEAF farmer membership and IFM practices **improve understanding among the local community**, over 91%, compared around half registered by the previous surveys. The main reason for the difference may be the way in which questions were asked: this more detailed survey allowed farmers to think about all the different aspects of this question before they answered, which led them to realise how significant LEAF membership has been in this respect.

'Case studies' illustrating LEAF farmer membership benefits on individual farms

CCRI also developed 10 'case studies' showing how different LEAF farmer members have benefited from their membership in different ways, and how these benefits have developed over time. These 'case studies' cover a wide range of farm types and will be published in full over the coming months.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the LEAF farmer members who were involved in this study, for making time and contributing their insights and ideas to the analysis.

Appendix A

Aims

This report had three aims:

1. To interview a sample of farmers to assess, and attempt to quantify as far as possible, the benefits of LEAF farmer membership and Integrated Farm Management (IFM) practices to farmers including the:
 - Financial benefits
 - Environmental benefits and
 - Social benefits.
2. To relate the findings of this study to those of previous member surveys conducted by LEAF.
3. To develop specific 'case studies' that can be used to illustrate these benefits on individual farms.

Data Collection

Thirty-five LEAF farmer members were interviewed either by telephone or face-to-face, representing around 2% of LEAF's total UK farmer members but covering all the main UK farm types, most UK regions and a good range of farm sizes. These members used a variety of the services which LEAF provides, including the LEAF Audit and LEAF Marque accreditation. Specifically the sample included:

- Arable;
- Dairy;
- Fresh Produce;
- Lowland grazing livestock/mixed;
- Mixed; and
- Upland grazing livestock farms;

The farms ranged in size from a 5 hectare nursery to a 5,500ha arable contracting business.

The interviews were in-depth and based around a semi-structured questionnaire, to ensure that each interview covered a similar range of topics. All the interviews took place in September and October 2011, with findings were subsequently analysed and compared to the findings of much larger LEAF membership surveys in 2008 and 2010.