

BFRS

The Borders Foundation for Rural Sustainability

Project Summary

FARM VENTURE GROUP INITIATIVE IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS & TO INCLUDE RURAL VENTURE GROUPS

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Farm Venture Group initiative identifies and encourages rural entrepreneurs. The Borders Foundation for Rural Sustainability, began establishing Farm Venture Groups (FVGs), as a pilot study for the Scottish Borders FMD Recovery Package. This BFRS initiative was successfully evaluated by SAOS in 2003, following which Scottish Enterprise Borders invited the Foundation to submit a further proposal to extend the project and set-up more groups.
- 1.2 The promotion of farm and other land-based diversification and enterprise has been a central driving force to the organisation's activities since its inception. BFRS commissioned primary research which made the case for farm and land-use diversification ('The Countryside Management Industry: Sustainability and the Pursuit of New Jobs and Incomes, 2002). While initially BFRS promoted diversification primarily to make-good falling farm incomes during the late 1990s, it now sees it as imperative for individual farms to claw-back modulated money post-CAP reform through rural development initiatives.
- 1.3 The initial pilot study demonstrates that the FVG method works. This is supported by the SAOS evaluation, both of which vindicate the results of initial BFRS research which indicated the willingness of farmers to co-operate.
- 1.4 The Borders Foundation for Rural Sustainability (BFRS) is a non-profit making company limited by guarantee and was formed in 1997 by land-managers with a collective expertise in rural and land-use diversification. The Foundation's objectives as defined in its memorandum and articles of association are;
 - To promote and advance the education of the public about working and living in the countryside
 - To enhance the quality of life of rural communities through the promotion and development of a diverse and sustainable local economy
 - To promote and develop the integrated management of land, wildlife and habitats

2. A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE FVG 'PILOT' PROJECT

- 2.1 FVGs work on the principle of self-motivation and group ownership of ideas, successes and risks. It is an informal process of confidence building ie confidence in the resources and skills available to each individual and between individuals within each FVG.

- 2.2 The FVGs were initiated by BFRS members following an approach to an individual whom they thought would be interested in exploring enterprise ideas on their farms with their neighbours or communities. All adult members of the farming family were invited and encouraged to take-part. Five groups were established involving some 25 farm holdings and 35 individuals. Not all of the individuals were involved on farms but were resident in the local community. The groups are spread across the region ie Peebleshire, Roxburghshire, Selkirkshire, Lauderdale and Berwickshire.
- 2.3 The range of new business ideas emergent from the groups are;
- Guided group trips along the Berwickshire cliffs involving four wheel drive transport, picnic hampers and themes (eg birds, archaeology, botany, local history etc)
 - On-farm log-cabins aimed particularly at the mountain-biking market
 - Community renewable energy using locally sourced biomass
 - Nature-based tourism involving James Hutton the world renowned geologist and Berwickshire farmer
 - Community tourism venture along St Cuthberts Way aimed primarily at the Scandinavian market and involving the local farming history (particularly sheep, shearing and wool)

3. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRENT PROJECT

- 3.1 Largely based on the pilot project, this project is aimed at providing farmers and their families with ventures which will provide another income and reason to stay on-farm. It's medium-term objective is to help secure sustainable farm businesses. Its long-term objective is to stimulate enterprise in the Borders countryside and increase local employment through the sustainable development of it's assets.
- 3.2 Farm Venture Groups (FVGs) share the burden of diversifying while the individual members continue to run their core businesses. They have the potential to involve family members, in particular farmers wives and employees. These groups however must be self-motivating and provide their own forum for generating ideas and linking these with the pooled resources.

4. SUPPORTING RESEARCH

- 4.1 In its initial proposal, BFRS presented supporting research which made the case for farm and land-use diversification. It also cited examples of farm diversification from Europe. It was evident from these areas of research that collaboration requires facilitation. Below are the recommendations of the SAOS (Walls, H. 2003), evaluation results of the BFRS pilot project, in support of the project extension;

Recommendations

The findings of this report highlight the benefits that have arisen as a consequence of the Farm Venture Project and provide an evaluation made by a development organisation. The activity undertaken will undoubtedly be important in helping to stimulate new and diversified farm enterprises in the coming years

Support the continued delivery of the Farm Venture Project in the Borders

The Farm Venture Project has stimulated a considerable amount of activity and interest. It has motivated a range of individuals and groups to reconsider their current circumstances

and provided a development framework in which new ideas and concepts can be developed. The project also demonstrates the time required and challenges involved in developing new co-operative or collaborative business development. To ensure the development framework is continued and the facilitation role maintained, the delivery of the Farm Venture Project should continue.

- 4.2** It is evident to BFRS that while it has made the case for the need for farm diversification and through its FVGs has demonstrated a method to promote farm (and potentially rural community) diversification, there is much greater scope and untapped resource for ‘differentiating’ the countryside product. Consider the variety in the list of the European examples of farm group / cooperative projects it quoted in its initial proposal;
- Ireland (Co Waterford); Lagooning for farm waste. The associated wetland is being managed for wildlife and open water stocked with trout for fishing – both earning income
 - Denmark (Bornholm); production and branding of the culinary heritage including salmon, herring, cheese and goat meat including the setting-up of small slaughterhouses and on-farm sale outlets.
 - France (the Auvergne); the coordination of local land-management groups to prepare conditions for local Ventures with the principal objective of keeping the young in the community
 - Italy (Val’Bormida); the growing, branding and marketing of medicinal plants ‘Agronatura’
 - Spain (Serra de Tramuntana); landscape restoration for the tourism industry - the restoration of 10,000m² dry stone walls and the recovery cultivatable terraces
 - Denmark (Sonderjylland); 14 local farmers have joined forces to set up an educational experience “Seeing what you eat” – it has also become a local showcase of how quality meat should be produced

5. IMPLEMENTING THE INITIATIVE

- 5.1** Six to ten development groups are being simultaneously set-up within the Region to informally explore prospects for enterprise development and diversification. The immediate objective is a broader exploration of possibilities within each group.
- 5.2** It is anticipated that one or more ventures will emerge from these development groups after the initial 2-3 meetings. These FVGs will then take-on the focussed procedure of developing an enterprise using the following steps:
- 1). Detailed skills and resource audit including a farm environmental audit
 - 2). Logistics mapping
 - 3). Business Planning
 - 4). Grant-aid search and application
- BFRS will continue to facilitate and broker ideas, and be involved in the detailed auditing and logistics mapping. It will not be involved directly in financial planning.

6. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- 6.1** After the initial motivation by BFRS, these Farm or Rural Community Venture Groups must then be self-motivating and with sufficient enthusiasm to feed this motivation through to

realisation and management of the Group Venture. Groups should be open where appropriate, to the inclusion of other neighbours.

- 6.2** In terms of group composition, while the first phase ‘Development Groups’ could number 10-2 individuals from a variety of business interests, the focused FVG is likely to be made-up of 5-7 individuals or businesses.

7. BFRS INVOLVEMENT

- 7.1** BFRS would initiate and organise the phase one Development Groups. It would be the overall facilitator and ideas broker in both project phases either by organising a suitable individual (eg via SBC) or directly undertaking it. It will be more ‘hands-off’ during phase two leaving progression and realisation upto FVG members.

- 7.2** Particularly relevant skills within BFRS are;

- Experiences of diversification (generating ideas, dealing with grants, dealing with the public authorities, dealing with the public)
- Expertise in other land management issues ie forestry, conservation management, sporting management
- Expertise in business management and marketing
- Expertise in initiating and sustaining projects
- Lessons learnt and expertise gained from the FVG pilot project