



Annual Report

2015-16

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Chair's Report

The last year has seen increased activity focused on the key priorities of the Voluntary Initiative. Drinking water quality is a major focus for our work. Our VI water sub-group chaired by Anne Buckenham works closely with the water companies, Catchment Sensitive Farming and the Environment Agency to drive change in water catchments. Metaldehyde (used in slug pellets) is a particular concern in some catchments. Here the VI co-ordinates with the Metaldehyde Stewardship Group (MSG) to help bring about improvements in key catchments. Herbicides used to control grass weeds in oilseed rape crops are causing difficulties for some water companies in England. The VI is launching a stewardship scheme to address this. Retention of these actives is crucial for the future of rapeseed production in the UK so it is vital that this new campaign is supported by farmers, as I am sure it will be.

The VI operates throughout the United Kingdom. The Operations Director and I recently visited Northern Ireland. We met with the Ulster Farming Union and visited a water treatment works. This highlighted the difficulty of removing MCPA from drinking water. The active is used in Northern Ireland and across the UK to treat rushes on livestock farms.

The Strategy Group also met in Scotland, hosted by NFU Scotland. Prior to the meeting, the group visited SASA (Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture). SASA advises the Scottish Government on pesticides and is also responsible for testing pesticide residues in foodstuffs.

Legislative changes over this last year has seen the VI focus on spray operator training. Several thousand operators with historic 'Grandfather Rights' have been required to undertake training and examination to continue spraying. Working with City & Guilds the VI fought to ensure there would be sufficient appropriate courses available for operators to obtain the necessary certification. I personally completed the NCPT Level 2 Course which replaced Grandfather Rights and found both the course and examination informative and helpful.

This summer the VI will launch 'Bee Connected' which is featured later in this report. The tool will enable operators to notify local beekeepers of planned insecticide applications. Much work has taken place to development this and I am pleased to report significant interest and encouraging uptake already. Along with the VI's Integrated Pest Management Plan we are able to effectively steward insecticides. I am pleased to report that the VI has developed a specific plan to address pests, weeds and diseases in Scotland.

In conclusion I reflect that pesticide use has never been under more scrutiny from both the public and regulators. The Voluntary Initiative has a vital role in promoting best practice and demonstrating responsible use. The VI aims to be a hub for best practice advice on all pesticides for all farmers. Working together we can minimise any negative impacts on the wider environment.

Richard Butler VI Chairman



Richard Butler on farm in Wiltshire

The VI and its Supporters

The Voluntary Initiative (VI) is an industry-led partnership that works with government, regulators and stakeholders to promote the responsible use of agricultural and horticultural pesticides.

The VI Steering Group oversees and coordinates the work of the VI and keeps Ministers informed:

Agricultural Engineers Association (AEA)	Farmers Union of Wales
Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board	Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust
Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC)	Food Standards Agency
Association of Independent Crop Consultants	Lantra
Assured Food Standards	LEAF
BASIS (Registration) Limited	National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC)
British Crop Production Council	National Farmers Union (NFU)
Chemicals Regulation Directorate, HSE	Natural England
City and Guilds	NFU Scotland
Country Land and Business Association (CLA)	Pesticides Action Network UK
Crop Protection Association (CPA)	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development, Northern Ireland	Scottish Environment Protection Agency
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills	The Scottish Government
Environment Agency (EA)	Ulster Farmers Union
	Water UK
	Welsh Assembly Government

The strategic aims of the VI are as follows:

- To ensure that industry demonstrates continued commitment to best practice in pesticide use within the context of Integrated Pest Management with the aim of minimising environmental impact and ensuring the availability of crop protection solutions in the future.
- For the VI to be seen as the centre of excellence on pesticide stewardship and best practice by government, industry and stakeholders.

The strategic priorities of the VI are:

- The quality of water abstracted for drinking is the highest priority with a particular focus on herbicides used in oilseed rape and grassland as well as working with the metaldehyde stewardship group on this pertinent issue.
- Insecticide stewardship to reduce the risk to bees and other pollinators and potential restrictions on insecticide use. This links to Integrated Pest Management, new approaches and the provision of messages on the use of a holistic approach to crop protection.
- National Action Plan for the Sustainable Use of Pesticides – the VI is a delivery mechanism for the UK NAP, reviewing and improving current measures and developing new approaches.
- Integration of messaging with other initiatives.

Adherence to best practice in pesticide use results in:

- Reduced risk to the aquatic environment and improved compliance with the Water Framework Directive.
- Protection of pollinators and other farm wildlife.
- Reassurance for people living adjacent to sprayed crops, bee keepers and the general public that pesticides are being used safely.
- Confidence to consumers and retailers that food produced in the UK is safe.
- A reduced risk of further regulation or restriction on the use of pesticides.

VI Priorities

1. Water

The VI Water Group leads and coordinates the work of the VI on issues relating to water quality. Its key priority is to aid compliance with the requirements of drinking water quality legislation, particularly for metaldehyde slug pellets and oilseed rape herbicides. A public consultation by Defra on this issue has been expected for some time.

Much of the VI work on water quality has been delivered through a partnership with Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Farming programme: this has included the provision of training courses for catchment officers, workshops for agronomists and the development of new advisory tools and materials as well as seasonal press releases. The delivery of text messages, emails and local water quality data is also supplied as part of this partnership. During 2015 this service was reviewed: most participants valued all three elements.

During the year the group made a tour of the Game Wildlife Conservation Trust farm at Loddington including an inspection of the bunded pesticide handling area and newly installed biobed as well a field visit to ponds with a discussion of changes to rotations/ cropping and farm practice that were being adopted to minimise risks to water.

The VI has also provided advice, support and expertise to the Environment Agency's What's in Your Backyard (WIYBY) website which is currently being upgraded. This is an essential tool to enable farmers and advisers to understand the areas covered by Drinking Water Safeguard Zones and any associated pesticide issues.

The group has also been engaged with industry stewardship initiatives such as the Metazachlor Matters campaign, the work of the Metaldehyde Stewardship Group and the VI plans for oilseed rape herbicides as well as the Allerton's Water Friendly Farming Project.

With more water companies now adopting catchment initiatives, collaboration and training of catchment officers is expected to increase; however, the main focus of the coming year will be the introduction of a new campaign to raise awareness of the issue of oilseed rape herbicides, which will promote appropriate best practice and the recruitment of a small number of target sub-catchments in 2017/18 where new additional measures will be tested. This work will as far as possible be integrated with Catchment Sensitive Farming.

"The UK water industry continues to work on a wide range of catchment management projects to protect drinking water sources by tackling diffuse pollution from pesticides. The VI provides valuable expertise and support to help deliver these projects. Examples of such support from the past year include the on-farm training courses, which were attended by a number of water company catchment officers, and the provision of experienced speakers for catchment meetings. Water companies are well aware that they cannot deliver catchment management solutions on their own, and therefore assistance from the VI, and other partner organisations, is both needed and appreciated."

Dr Dinah Hillier Water UK



The Water Group inspect the bunded handling facilities at Loddington

2. Biodiversity

One of the priorities of the Voluntary Initiative is to minimise the risk to bees and other pollinators. This year, working with the NFU and the British Beekeepers Association (BBKA) the CPA has funded and developed the latest VI tool – Bee Connected. This web based alert system enables operators to directly alert local beekeepers of their planned insecticide applications. To ensure beekeepers are only notified of a relevant spray event, the system is designed for notifications relating to insecticide applications only, and will include details of the crop being sprayed and whether it is bordered by flower-rich margins. Beekeepers will be able to decide how close a spray event has to be to their hives before they are notified, up to a maximum of 5km. As well as the timing and name of the active ingredient(s) the alert includes the distance and direction of the planned spray event as well as further information about the active(s) as detailed in the BCPC UK Pesticides Guid. Following a successful pilot in Hertfordshire Bee Connected will be launched across the UK in September 2016.



BeeConnected

Towards the end of 2015 the VI and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) launched a joint document 'Crop Protection for Arable and Livestock Farmers'. There are plans to follow the success of the document with an online training module next year. The Campaign for the Farmed Environment encourages farmers to manage land voluntarily for the environment. Working together has helped to ensure that consistent messages on crop protection and biodiversity are being delivered to farmers. The VI's network of regional speakers has been deployed across England to support CFE events, and the CFE has been actively promoting Bee Connected at pollinator workshop in every English county.

3. Meeting the Sustainable Use Directive

The European Sustainable Use Directive (SUD) has been transposed into UK legislation. It aims to reduce the risks of pesticide use to human health and the environment. The VI and its schemes provide delivery mechanisms which help meet many aims of the SUD and the UK's National Action Plan for the sustainable use of pesticides. There are three main elements which affect farmers and sprayer operators:

- To demonstrate Integrated Pest Management (IPM) – economically and environmentally sustainable management of pests, weeds and diseases using cultural, chemical, physical and biological controls. The VI IPM plan has been adopted by the UK farm assurance schemes, ensuring IPM is used on farm. The VI in Scotland has now launched a specific IPM plan to address the particular weed, disease and pest challenges in Scotland.
- For all operators to hold a certificate of competence. This part of the SUD came into force in November 2015. The VI worked with City & Guilds to produce a specific qualification for those who had many years of spraying experience but no approved certificate of competence. By March 2016 over 5000 applicants had successfully completed this course, raising the professionalism of the UK's sprayer operators and ensuring operators are up to date not only with legislation but safe handling and stewardship of pesticides. A great part of the work of the VI during this period has been to raise awareness of the need for operators to hold a certificate of competence.
- For equipment to be tested. From November this year all pesticide application equipment must have been tested by the VI's National Sprayer Testing Scheme. The majority of equipment in regular use is already tested voluntarily on an annual basis, as the UK farm assurance schemes have long championed this as best practice. The VI has been raising awareness of the new need for tests over the past months and will continue to do so.

Key measures and indicators

National Register of Sprayer Operators (NRoSO)

NRoSO is a VI scheme managed by City & Guilds. It is a central register of sprayer operators using Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as a means of ensuring ongoing training to ensure best practice. Members must be fully qualified and collect a minimum number of CPD points each year. Membership of NRoSO is a necessary requirement of many of the UK's farm assurance schemes. As of March 31st 2016 there were 20,865 NRoSO members, a slight reduction since last year as some operators who were previously using Grandfather Rights have chosen to cease spray activities.



National Sprayer Testing Scheme (NSTS)

The NSTS is a VI scheme managed by the Agricultural Engineers Association. In the last year 15394 tests were carried out. The most common faults identified by examiners were leaks and drips; all are corrected before the machine is given a certificate. From November 2016 pesticide application equipment must hold a valid test certificate to comply with the Sustainable Use Directive.



Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPMP)

The VI's IPMP is was developed by the NFU. In 2016 the Scottish VI group and NFU Scotland developed a specific IPM plan for Scotland. LEAF also provides a plan as part of their member's annual audit and Conservation Grade farmers also fulfil the objectives of integrated pest management. IPM plans help ensure economically and environmentally sustainable management of pests, weeds and diseases using a range of cultural, chemical, physical and biological controls. The plans are used by over 11,000 farmers across approximately 3 million hectares. Of these figures the LEAF Sustainable Farming review accounts for 449,388ha and Conservation Grade accounts for 24,145ha.



Indicator	March 31 st 2014	March 31 st 2015	March 31 st 2016
NRoSO members	21,169	21,672	20,865
NSTS tests	14,189	15,290	15,394
IPMP (since 2014)		2,664,652 ha	2,912,182 ha

Regional uptake of VI schemes is as follows:

Region	NSTS tests	NRoSO members	IPMP completed
England	13871	17940	10829
Scotland	1216	2138	372
Wales	213	598	116
Northern Ireland	94	187	59

The VI around the UK

Through its national groups the VI provides a UK wide framework for promoting best practice at the local level.

Scotland

Under the chairmanship of Andrew Moir, an arable farmer from near Laurencekirk in North East Scotland, the Scottish VI Group has drawn on its diverse membership to have a number of very productive meetings over the last year. Continuing to support Scottish Water in its Sustainable Catchment Management initiative, the group also advised Scottish Government on the development of a bespoke IPM plan for Scottish farmers. The plan is now available via the VI website, and is the first in a number of planned actions to promote IPM in Scotland.

“Even after 15 years, the VI remains an important means to promote good practice and demonstrate that farmers are aware of their environmental obligations when using Plant Protection Products. With these vital tools under ever greater pressure, I believe farmers should use the VI’s resources even more than they already do. And for those curious or critical of farming’s use of plant protection products one look at the VI will help you understand the high levels of stewardship in place in Scotland and across the UK.”

Andrew Moir, VI Chairman, Scotland.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Water Catchment Partnership (WCP) works with stakeholders to promote best practice and raise awareness among all users of plant protection products on water quality issues. There has been a continued focus on the Derg catchment, a major source of drinking water, where there have previously been concerns about MCPA detected in raw water. The Partnership has been active in the area at agricultural shows and has visited individual farming businesses.

This year has seen an increased uptake in training and CPD to ensure compliance with the Sustainable Use Directive. A number of service providers have offered training and assessment services to City and Guilds or LANTRA standard and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the College of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs (CAFRE) have been instrumental in the delivery of the annual NRoSO course.

VI Chair Richard Butler and the Operations Director visited a water treatment plant near Carrickfergus in County Antrim to better understand the investments being made to meet standards and with the Partnership then visited a vegetable farm on the Ards Peninsula in County Down. *“This provided an invaluable opportunity for Northern Ireland to strengthen and enhance our involvement with the VI. Of specific interest was the state of the art sprayer filling area and biofilter, which helps to prevent pesticides reaching water. Prevention is always better than cure!”*

Tim McClelland, VI Chairman, Northern Ireland.

Wales

The main focus of activity in Wales during this past year has been to raise awareness of the ending of Grandfather Rights last November and the changes to equipment testing requirements coming into force later this year. The VI and NSTS testing leaflet has been distributed at shows and reproduced in the Farming Wales magazine and regular meetings have been conducted with Welsh Government and other industry partners to help aid communication.

In addition the VI and its partners have been promoting a weed-wiper trial in Ceredigion to reduce detections in the River Teifi and Upper Wye. Working with the Welsh Water, further catchment based work is planned for next year.

Working with other initiatives

The VI is committed to working with, bringing together and championing other initiatives in this area.

Nematicide Stewardship Programme



The Nematicide Stewardship Programme promotes best practice, helping to ensure the responsible use of nematicides; a vital tool in tackling potato cyst nematodes - the biggest pest threat to the potato industry. The VI supports this group and its objectives. www.nspstewardship.co.uk

Metaldehyde Stewardship Group

Metaldehyde in raw water is a particular problem in catchments used as drinking water sources. The aim of the group is to promote and encourage best practice use of metaldehyde slug pellets, to minimise environmental impacts and in particular protect water. The VI works closely with the Metaldehyde Stewardship Group to address these issues. www.getpelletwise.co.uk



Metazachlor Matters



Active substances including the oilseed rape herbicides metazachlor and quinmerac are increasingly under the spotlight. The focus of this company initiative is on agronomic best practice and changing on-farm practices to maintain their long term availability. www.metazachlormatters.co.uk

Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use

The VI has strengthened links with the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use which promotes best practice and training for the use of rodenticides among all professional users including farmers. A new stewardship initiative was launched in 2015, which the VI has been promoting. www.thinkwildlife.org



Catchment Sensitive Farming



A clear solution for farmers

CATCHMENT SENSITIVE FARMING

The VI has had a Strategic Partnership (renewed annually) with Catchment Sensitive Farming since 2009, which sponsors guest speakers at farmer meetings, seasonal media releases and topical briefing notes, agronomist workshops and training courses for Natural England and Rivers Trust staff. A weekly text messaging service and monthly water quality data collection service is also provided.

Campaign for the Farmed Environment

As well as working in partnership on issues affecting pollinators and wider farm biodiversity, the VI has provided the CFE with speakers to aid local CFE delivery. Together the VI and CFE launched a best practice document for arable and grassland farmers. www.cfeonline.org.uk



Tried & Tested



This initiative addresses the issues associated with nutrient management – particularly the use of manures and slurries; one of its aims is to help keep nitrates out of watercourses. As water protection is a key theme for both initiatives the VI and T&T work together where possible. www.nutrientmanagement.org

The Amenity Forum promotes and encourages proper and responsible use of both pesticides and integrated methods to amenity users of professional plant protection products. The VI and Amenity Forum work together on common aims and objectives. www.amenityforum.co.uk





**The
Voluntary
Initiative**

Promoting responsible pesticide use

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The Voluntary Initiative Community Interest Company

The Voluntary Initiative registered with Companies House as a Community Interest Company (The VI-CIC) in 2009. The VI-CIC has 10 directors, including the eight organisations that sponsor the VI:

