

## Rother Valley Farmers Group: 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual & Final Report (2021)



### Overview to date

- The project has run for just over three years, CSFF funding ended 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021
- We started with 33 members and we now have 53 covering over 11200 hectares (27600 acres)
- Delivered over 22 events including: Pollinator Training, Uncommon Arable Plants, Soil Health, Natural capital & Eco-system payments & ELMs, Farmland birds, visit to S. Water's Hardham Plant
- Set up the Metaldehyde-Free RVFG Farmer Pledge & Compensation Scheme with Southern Water
- Set up farmer-led RVFG Steering Group & RVFG Liaison Group for planning and engagement
- Instigated S.Water/EU-CPES/RVFG Soil Health Monitoring Project for RVFG members
- Grown farmer participation at RVFG events overtime
- Facilitator endorsed 10 CSS applications submitted by members to aid landscape conservation

### Introduction

As you read this, the world is going through unprecedented change, with the pandemic better controlled yet running its course and climate change going up the agenda fast, both local and global in scale and impact<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile local farmers continue to strive to deliver their best, facing the future with a hands-on approach, backed by knowledge and experience, challenged as ever by the seasons, market and regulatory forces. The hot dry spell in June and July saw a rush to bring in hay and begin harvest early; a typically unsettled August now seems set, some things remain the same.

Over the last year, Government lockdowns due to the Coronavirus pandemic spiked interest in local food outlets with periods of panic buying when there was no food shortage and 'local stores' perceived less risky and more accessible than large supermarkets. Climate change is likely to also increase food concerns, raising farm sector hopes of a long term demand for reliable supplies of local food of proven provenance and high environmental standards, through which farmer groups could play a key role. This remains a real possibility, with a move away from CAP and its legacy of championing cheap food at a high environmental cost, although coming out of this system is not likely to be straightforward. It will challenge a century's worth of 'conventional farm' thinking and equally powerful commercial agri-sector interests and supermarket control. Critically it would also require a step change in how farmers (and all involved in the food and agri-environment sectors) think about farming: from the soil beneath our feet, to increasingly threatened fresh water supplies and air/climate issues. Farming now covers almost half of the world's land, putting the food and farm sector at the forefront of the fight against climate change and ecosystem resilience, on a par with the transitions also needed in the transport and energy sectors<sup>2</sup> to tackle the climate emergency.

These issues and challenges are discussed at length in UK's newly published National Food Strategy, the first independent review of England's entire food system for 75 years (dated June 2021)<sup>3</sup>. The plan aims to '**deliver safe, healthy and affordable food**' which also '**restores and enhances the natural environment for the next generation in this country**'. It deserves to be read by all farmers and anyone involved in delivering the nation's food, especially as we move away from Europe and the CAP<sup>3</sup>. While in the medium to long-term local farmer groups are likely to play an important role in providing more local food of high provenance and environmental standards at 'affordable prices', it is felt that **at the present time** the focus for farmers should remain on improving the farmed environment and its coordination and connectivity at a landscape scale, considered by RVFG Facilitators to be where the

greatest commercial opportunities from the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme and private funding lie, and equally important from a climate change standpoint.

Bringing farmers together, which was a key remit of setting up the RVFG via the CS Facilitation Fund, enables local farmers to join forces with their neighbours to help deliver sustainable food and environmental benefits as viable commercial enterprises. The Coronavirus restrictions resulted in the RVFG having to postpone some events and training, with the CS Facilitation Fund deadline extended from April to the end of June 2021, nevertheless it has been another busy and rewarding year. While the group at present is at a crossroads with respect to funding, it is very much anticipated that the group will continue for the long term, and meanwhile it is important to summarise recent achievements as follows:

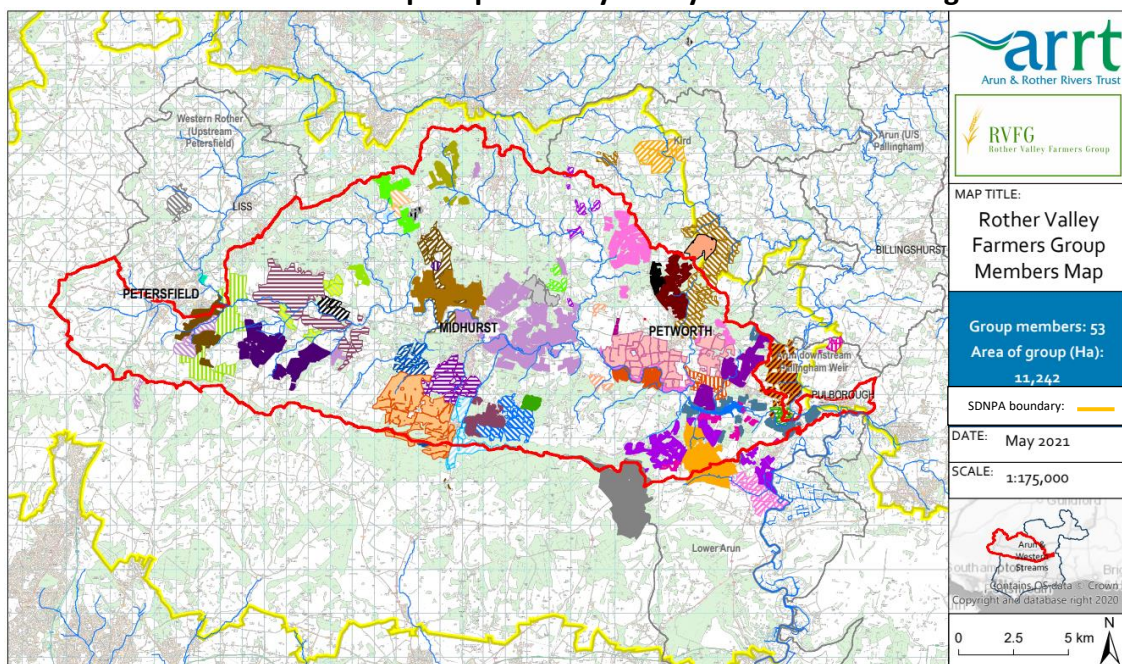
**Membership**

The RVFG started with around 30 interested farmers in 2018 and has grown to 53 farm members covering approximately 11,200 hectares of the Rother valley as of June 2021. It is estimated this represents approximately 65% of the actively farmed area within our original boundary. Key objectives going forward (subject to funding) include contacting the other Rother farmers to see if they would like to join, stimulating active engagement, support farmer-led ideas and provide natural capital (digital) mapping to help farmers support sustainable farm businesses.

**Boundary Revisions / Growing the Group & Going Forward**

The original boundary of the RVFG was focussed along the River Rother, from around Petersfield downstream to its confluence with the River Arun at Hardham. This roughly fits the Environment Agency’s catchment boundary for the Western Rother and is within the South Downs National Park Authority’s boundary, with its eastern and southern boundaries abutting the Arun to Adur Farmers Group. The map below shows RVFG membership within the ‘Western Rother’ EA catchment boundary (shown as a red line on the map).

**RVFG Membership Map 2021: by anonymised farm holding**



ARRT Map Ref: Western Rother operational catchment boundary: EA copyright and database rights 2014, all rights reserved. Farmer group membership boundaries contains or derived from info’ supplied by OS and RPA: Crown copyright and database right (2021) OS Licence No: 1000022021. National Park boundary: Natural England & OS & RPA copyrights (2021).

There has been interest from both local farmers and external organisations to extend the boundary to upstream of Petersfield, around the parish of Hawkley. During the last year it has become apparent that Southern Water have little regulatory drivers along the Western Rother. There are, however, regulatory

drivers for them with regard to pesticides in the upper Rother catchment which could support extending the RVFG boundary to include the headwaters of the River Rother. The Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT) that hosts the RVFG are actively working to enhance positive engagement with Southern Water and there is a continued Government push for the water industry to engage with farmers/land managers, the message is: watch this space! The delivery of landscape scale conservation and identification of environmental benefits that could yield future income streams from blended private and public sources further supports this argument. Such an extension could be formalised now the period of CS Facilitation Funding has ended if there is funding coming forward to help run the group.

To an extent, the boundary of the RVFG is an arbitrary construct; farmer groups could be based on an arable or dairy basis, for example, or focus on a single environmental resource such as soil health. All debate on how best to develop the group is excellent and encouraged. The key aspect from an agri-environmental viewpoint, is delivering sustainable food hand-in-hand with the environment and respecting **the 3 interconnected environmental resources that are common to all farms: air, land and water**. From these key resources stem the connectivity of our natural world, comprising all plant life (flora), animal life (fauna), the ensuing biodiversity, aesthetic landscapes, and linked water/carbon/nutrient cycles and systems etc., which underpin a viable farming concern (and indeed society at large). This approach was the rationale for using river catchment boundaries for the RVFG (as has been used by many other successful farm clusters in England) in addition to providing a relevant base for engagement with the water industry. A focus on soil health is also excellent as it resonates well with farmers, links clearly with farm finances and bridges the gap to the assessment of land, water and air on an integrated basis.

### **Planning on a Landscape Scale**

Digital mapping of RVFG members was outside of the CS Facilitation Fund and remains a key aim for the long term. Funding for this will be sought if there is agreement and interest from local farmers for the Group to continue. This could be delivered via the Arun & Rother Rivers Trust (ARRT), the local Rivers Trust charity that hosts the RVFG, if funds allow. Why is this important? – digital mapping of farmed land is key to enabling farmers deliver environmental resources at a scale that fits with Government's new system for agri-environmental payments (ELMs). This data needs to be managed on a single and multi-farm basis, using GIS (geographic information systems) and The Land App (TLA) tools. For example, the successful delivery of viable local populations of Lapwings cannot be secured by one farm acting in isolation: landscape scale conservation maps enable 'bigger, better and more joined up' habitats suitable for thriving Lapwing populations to be identified and considered alongside appropriate farmland options and incentives. The new ELM scheme will reward collaboration between farmers/land managers and encourage farmer groups.

Examples of landscape scale projects that would fit well with comprehensive agri-environment digital maps of the RVFG include the SDNPA's inspired 'Bee-Lines' project, mentioned at the RVFG Pollinator Training event led by Laurie Jackson of Buglife (March 2021). Similarly, linking up with forested and woodland areas along the Rother Valley could deliver substantial agri-environmental benefits, through identifying options for buffering and connecting up areas of more open countryside/farmland. Natural flood management opportunities could also attract funding and incentives for farmers. Digital mapping on a RVFG membership basis would aid the planning and delivery of these important objectives (and much more, such as soil-carbon sequestration potential) which are expected to be incentivized through ELMs and future private commercial funding streams. More projects need to be led by farmers and supported by wider farmer-group expertise with stakeholder support.

### **Communications**

A RVFG farmer-led steering group was set up in 2018 to help run and grow the group and deliver CSFF agreed aims and objectives. Key members of the RVFG Steering Group are shown in Photo 1 (below), representatives from Southern Water were also members of the steering group. A big thank you is extended to all the farmers who gave their time voluntarily to support and drive the RVFG.



Photo: RVFG Steering Group members 2021



RVFG members are typically contacted via emails to provide information on up-coming events and topics of interest. The facilitation team prepares and circulates Annual CSFF Reports, *RVFG e-newsletters* and any event updates/information. The SDNPA has also set up a dedicated website, [www.southdownsfarming.com](http://www.southdownsfarming.com) which has a separate section for each of the Farmer Groups within the authority's boundary, and for which we have editorial control. Communication needs to be a growing part of the RVFG going forward to help engage with wider stakeholder organisations and individuals to leverage interest and activity; again, this takes time and resources to manage and update.

The SDNPA's Near Field Communication (NFC)/QR code project originally proposed by the neighbouring Arun to Adur farmer group has now been rolled out across two other facilitation funded groups and the SDNPA is seeking funding to roll this out across other groups including the RVFG. These new contact and GPS (global position status) technologies enable people with smartphones walking along the South Downs Way to pick up short videos of the farmer/land manager that describe the work involved behind the landscape they enjoy. New funding options such as the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) could also be a viable funding vehicle for this type of project.

### **Target Species and Recording**

Agri-environment payments in England are based on priority habitats and species maps and registers managed by Natural England. The accuracy of these databases as a basis for payments has been queried at times: digital mapping of farmer groups could enable a second-check (if needed) to improve this system. For example, a RVFG member had some superb low-input grassland with high wildflower diversity that was not formally recognised by Natural England's priority habitat/species inventory. Discussions between the farmer and facilitator enabled an improved agri-environment payment to be reached, via querying the existing priority habitat and species maps.

The RVFG's voluntary target species are Lapwing, Yellowhammer, Barn Owl, Rare Arable Plants (Corn marigold, Cornflower, and Common fumitory) and River Invertebrates (defined as the 8 key species used in the River Fly Partnership tool). Many specialist training events on wildlife target species and wider conservation/natural resource management have been delivered to RVFG farmers. There has been a lot of constructive talk and thought about how best to deliver wildlife targets for farmer groups and how these fit within wider agri-environment and sustainable food systems. Farmer groups can enable a detailed understanding of what key wildlife species need in order to increase and

thrive. The RVFG's target species have been mainly assessed through indirect ways, such as supporting farmers to take part in the farmland bird species counts and surveys undertaken annually by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and the South Downs Farmland Bird (Survey) Initiative. The RVFG wildlife targets are voluntary and outside of the main deliverables in the CS Facilitation Fund plan. The aim behind introducing them was to help both farmers and facilitators explore practical options for gathering accurate up-to-date wildlife/environmental metrics on a single and multi-farm basis. It is fair to say that bringing all the target information together to be able to demonstrate farmland increases has not been possible and a different approach is needed given the large resources of time/expertise involved which is likely to be well in excess of available funds.

Natural England's recent (2021) release of its Combined Habitat Layers database map will improve the delivery of farmland conservation at the landscape scale. Instead of, or perhaps alongside localised small-scale annual wildlife monitoring (using specialists and volunteers as needed), there needs to be a move to planning the development and preparation of wildlife guidance sheets to help farmers plan and deliver the range of conditions and management options each year knowing that this should deliver increases in their respective wildlife target species/habitats. Such an approach would help to identify the often hidden costs that hinder such steps being made and incentivise farmers accordingly.

Regular farm review visits, selective monitoring (as mentioned above) and perhaps Bio-Blitzes to help identify species present and how they are faring, alongside bringing-in wider community engagement and private income streams, seems to offer a potential means forward.

### **Local Partnership and Support**

Support provided to the RVFG has been of an excellent standard, enabled through the operation of the RVFG Liaison Group that has met twice a year. This is made up of individuals from the SDNPA, EA, private water industry, Sussex Wildlife Trust, the Forestry Commission, Catchment Sensitive Farming, and academics from the universities of Chichester, Northampton, Exeter and Oxford. The last RVFG Liaison Group meeting was in January 2021 with a talk from the Director of the Sussex Local Nature Partnership (LNP) introducing the Natural Capital Investment Strategy for Sussex.

It is disappointing to report that no paid options from Southern Water have been forthcoming to our members as yet, compared to that for members of the more established Arun to Adur farmers group nearby, paid to reduce nitrate leaching to groundwater from spring 2019<sup>4</sup>. This in part reflects the lack of regulatory drivers for Southern Water in the main Rother valley, although pesticide related drivers are becoming more apparent in the upper reaches of the Rother, upstream of Petersfield. Farmer advice and support for enhanced catchment management are available via Catchment Sensitive Farming and Southern Water's Catchment First programme. Southern Water representatives have been part of the RVFG's Steering Group and attended the regular meetings kindly hosted by Moor Farm, Petworth. We were pleased with Southern Water's funding in 2019/20 to aid the RVFG's Metaldehyde-free Initiative with compensation payments made to RVFG members for opting to use the more expensive and less ecologically impacting Ferrous Phosphate alternative. The facilitators remain optimistic for future engagement, the RVFG is still at a relatively early stage, with the climate emergency forcing a quicker transition to more regenerative/sustainable farm methods which in itself is a challenge.

Good links have been established with the South Downs National Park Charitable Trust, with a bid for the creation of 5-6 new RVFG farm ponds within the Rother Valley submitted in May 2021 to the national Green Recovery Fund programme. Although unsuccessful, the bid was recognised through subsequent feedback to be of a high standard and will be re-submitted to other funding options in the near future. It would be good to submit further RVFG projects for potential funding through the SDNP's Charitable Trust in the future. There has also been constructive engagement with the Environment Agency (EA) via their role in progressing their Business in the Community (BITC) project, with RVFG facilitators playing an active part. This involved linking up with large food retailers and exploring options

for bringing in additional private sector income streams to farmers/land managers for delivering environmental gains and benefits (e.g., natural flood management, carbon credit payments) and evaluating the types of new market platforms and infrastructure needed to deliver novel natural capital markets.

### **Meetings Cooperation with the Group**

There has been a slow yet steady rise in interest in the RVFG shown by its farmer members, noted in increased attendance at events throughout 2021. We held two RVFG Steering Group meetings on 18<sup>th</sup> January and 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021, with updates provided to members in between (February 2021) outlining the approximate costs for running the RVFG post-CS Facilitation Funding and the circulation of a draft RVFG Business Plan.

An extra-ordinary meeting was held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2021 at Kilsham Farm to review potential interest in farmer-funding to help support the running of the group and options for the future. Thoughts on the future of landscape scale farmer-led projects and digital mapping were also progressed. It is clear that there is considerable interest in maintaining a farmer group yet no clear adoption to progress farmer-payments (as yet) to help support its future running. There is interest by a group of RVFG farmers to progress a soil health project focusing on carbon monitoring and evaluation. It was noted that it has taken the neighbouring Arun to Adur farmer group (which benefited from 5 years of CS Facilitation Funding and has high farmer-landowner numbers with high agri-environment uptake) almost a year to transition from CS Facilitation Funded status to a part farmer-funded group, set up as its own charitable not-for-profit organisation. Moving from a position of effectively 'free' farmer group membership and facilitation through to a group that requires resources to keep it running is a big step to transition from, especially during a time of unprecedented change for the UK agricultural sector.

### **Main Farmer Meeting, Training Sessions**

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020/21 and related UK Government lockdowns, many RVFG planned farmer meetings and training activities were re-configured and put online, delivering a suite of workshops/events aligned to the CSFF/RVFG contract with Natural England.

Considerably more than the CSFF contractual needs have been delivered while running the RVFG. For example, designing and co-delivering the Metaldehyde-Free Initiative; facilitator input to progressing a 5-year soil health project for the RVFG; proposals/plans outlined for digital mapping of the RVFG; meetings with local Members of Parliament and Parish Councils; BITC (Business-in-the-Community) related workshops; talks and plans to help deliver natural capital based agri-environment options and frameworks; RVFG eNewsletters drafted and circulated; farm pond recreation plans submitted to the Green Recovery Fund (and resubmitted to further funds); input to the SDNPA's new Farm Carbon (Cutting) Project, and a Draft RVFG Business Plan to help members continue as a farmer group for the Rother valley.

There was an online all-farmer meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2020 to help progress the future running of the RVFG post-CSFF funding, in addition to an update on the RVFG/S.Water/EU-CPES Soil Health project by Mr. Stephen Woodley (agronomist and project lead) and a wider discussion on developing markets for environmental goods which is key to the Government's new ELM scheme, with the motto of 'public money for public (environmental) goods'.

### **Annual Farm Walk**

An annual farm walk element was incorporated into the RVFG Soil Health training event delivered on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021 at Fatherings Farm (managed as part of Buddington Farm). Soil health training was delivered in the field where the benefits of soil monitoring, mixed farming and information about the new proposed Soil Health Standard options under Tier 1 of ELMs (called the Sustainable Farm Initiative (SFI)) were introduced and discussed.

### **Small Group Training Sessions**

It has been a busy first-half of 2021 to deliver training events within the extended June CSFF deadline to accommodate delays due to the Coronavirus pandemic. A well-attended virtual Barn Owl Training Event was delivered on the 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021, led by Dr. Matt Stevens of the Hawk Conservancy Trust. Matt provided information to farmers on measures to provide habitat/land management that will support barn owl populations. Key issues included (i) understanding the needs of barn owls in order to survive, (ii) type and extent of habitats such as tussocky old grassland margins, conservation headlands and hedges required by small mammals (shrews, short tail voles) that form the main source of food for barn owls, (iii) the importance of the habitat connectivity across individual/multiple farms to support natural food and habitat for survival and (iv) supporting the 'responsible rodenticide' initiative to help prevent and/or minimise impact of farm 'pest control' measures on barn owls. This was followed on the 30<sup>th</sup> March 2021 by an online training session for farmers on Pollinators, led by Ms. Laurie Jackson who has worked for Buglife. This event was again well attended and provided positive farmer feedback such as 'the event helped increase my understanding of the value of pollinators and their vital role (to farming and wildlife)', and 'very useful to see how pollinators move around the landscape'.

A full farmer training meeting, incorporating a farm walk and smaller training event, was delivered via a successful RVFG Soil Health event kindly hosted by Mr. James Renwick of Buddington Farm, near Midhurst, on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021. A maximum number of 30 farmers attended due to Covid restrictions; it was good to see strong farmer attendance and interest in the event. The group was split into two, with half hearing a dedicated earthworm specialist (Dr. David Jones from the Natural History Museum) provide advice and information to farmers about the importance of earthworms for soil health. The groups were then switched over, with detailed soil health/monitoring advice provided in the field by agronomist Mr. Stephen Woodley and by Ms. Victoria Hawkins, Catchment Sensitive Officer (CSF), providing information on Soil Health metrics and options under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI).

### **Public Engagement**

The farm walk for the local community was restricted by UK Government Covid-regulations, so the engagement project was delivered as an interactive online talk presented to members of the Midhurst Society on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2021. Midhurst is geographically located at the centre of the Rother Valley and home to the South Downs National Park Authority's headquarters, so it seemed a fitting place to highlight the work and aims of the RVFG to the local community. A presentation of the aims and achievements of the RVFG was outlined and a constructive and lively question and answer session followed. Information about the RVFG is available on the Midhurst Society website for future reference by local individuals and community organisations.

### **Agri-environment Scheme Uptake**

Natural England's decision to allow HLS and CS agreements to be rolled over due to the pandemic and introduction of the new ELM scheme is popular with RVFG members in agri-environment schemes, with most expiries deciding to roll-on their agreements on an annual basis until more information about ELMs becomes available. Colin Hedley endorsed ten CSS applications over the last three years as, which equates to about a fifth of RVFG membership which is pleasing.

### **RVFG/Southern Water/EU Interreg-CPES Soil Monitoring Project**

This excellent and comprehensive project is now in its third year (out of five) and gathering invaluable information about the health of soils under different farm systems. The neighbouring Arun to Adur Farmers Group is now in its fourth year of a similar project and shows how monitoring spring and autumn soil nitrogen content demonstrates the impact of crop type and nitrogen applications on post-harvest residuals. These results can inform better decision making around nitrogen applications, saving money, and reducing nitrate impacts to water, land, and air resources. The RVFG soil health results will be collated, and key conclusions circulated to the Group over coming years.

### **Farm Carbon (Cutting) Project**

The SDNPA has secured funding to deliver a Farm Carbon Cutting project across all 6 farmer groups within its boundary. Five RVFG farmers are being invited to engage with the project, which will provide tailored advice and active support to determine farm-carbon levels and options for valuing carbon sequestration going forward. A suite of soil monitoring will be undertaken as part of the project, providing valuable information to aid farm planning and will be of use should farmers decide to apply for the Government's new ELM scheme.

### **The Future of the Group**

Our initial three-year funding through the CS Facilitation Fund expired at the end of June 2021 and the RVFG is now embarking on a journey to discuss and decide what they would like to achieve as a Group for the future. As the initial ARRT based RVFG CS Facilitation Team, Colin, Tracy and I would like to say a very big **thank you** for all the help, support and enthusiasm shown by many RVFG farmers who have helped to deliver the start of what we hope will be a highly successful farmers group that is here for the long term. If we see proper incentives available through the Government's new ELM agri-environment scheme and with developing opportunities to offer privately funded environmental projects too we believe we can deliver exciting and co-ordinated environmental activity while improving the financial and social aspects for our individual members. As David Montgomery noted in his inspirational book 'Growing A Revolution'<sup>5</sup>, farmers are in a unique position to make a huge difference to all our futures (not least their own) through championing strong agri-environmental farming, **providing an optimistic outlook for the future.**



Report prepared by Ses Wright & Colin Hedley, RVFG Facilitators, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept' 2021

Notes:

1. **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC):Report 2021:** Landmark study published 9<sup>th</sup> August 2021 agreed by world governments warns of climate breakdown with increasingly extreme heatwaves, drought, and flooding in just over a decade unless the world acts fast to avoid catastrophe. Endorsed by the United Nations as '**Code Red for Humanity**'. Summary of main 2021 report (key headlines) weblink: [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_Headline\\_Statements.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Headline_Statements.pdf)
2. **The Sustainable Food Trust**, global food and agriculture baseline figures cited under 'Measuring Sustainability' weblink ref: <https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/key-issues/sustainability-metrics/>
3. **The National Food Plan, 2021**, An Independent Review by Henry Dimbleby. Weblink to report: <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>
4. S.Water payments fall upon Arun to Adur farmer group members in part due to local geological and hydrological factors, protected drinking water area status and wider designations.
5. **David. R. Montgomery, 'Growing A Revolution: Bringing Our Soil Back to Life' 2017** published by Norton & Company.