

Summary Notes from the joint meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee for the Biofertiliser Certification Scheme and Compost Certification Scheme

Wednesday 17th November

Online

Chair: Stephen Nortcliff

Attendees:

Georgia Phetmanh	REAL
Thomas Aspray	REAL
Emma Laws	REAL
Jo Chapman	BCS Operators' Representative
Gregor Keenan	CCS Producers' Representative
Roy Lawford	OF&G
Nicholas John	ACL
Sophie Arguile	NSF
Sarah Pitcher	Laboratories' Representative
Fiona Donaldson	SEPA
Kathy Nicholls	EA
Lizzie Downs	DEFRA
Vilma Cortes	DEFRA
Gillian Mannix	UKAS
Simon Thorpe	Red Tractor

1. Welcome and Introductions

SN welcomed everyone to the meeting and initiated roundtable introductions.

2. Minutes and Actions from the Last Meeting

GP delivered an update of progress made on the actions from the TAC meeting in June.

REAL to develop roadmap for development of PT scheme/round robin testing for scheme tests

REAL have produced an internal paper on this – for the development of a PT programme or round robin testing. In the next Research Hub call for proposals, REAL plans to submit a project proposal for the development of a PT programme. If not selected, the development of a more comprehensive round robin testing scheme will be focussed on.

SN recalled that a research proposal on this had been submitted by a different organisation in 2020 and that it was a strong proposal, but it was withdrawn by the submitter, and as such there is plenty of background data on this for submission of a new proposal.

REAL to request recording of QP workshops from REA to circulate to TAC members if possible

Actioned.

REAL MDWG to take into account that the EA's definition of waste panel opening end of July

As covered in the summary paper, the MDWG meeting was postponed into early 2022 and therefore this action is ongoing. It will be on the agenda for the MDWG next year.

REAL to consider sharing key points from MDWG meetings if minutes cannot be circulated.

This will be actioned next year.

MR to feedback SN's comments on accessing reports in the Research Library

This was actioned and the issue discussed with the NNFC. NNFC confirmed that some links do require institutional access. It has been suggested that supplying the email address of the author could increase access, as some will provide their articles for free if emailed.

SN added that increasingly if research is government funded then departments are requiring the work to have open access. As such, this is likely to be a problem that lessens over time.

LD confirmed DEFRA have this policy.

REAL and OF&G to investigate why a certificate suspended by OF&G had not appeared in the monthly report

The certificate suspension decision was reported by one team at OF&G to REAL and the environmental regulator but was missed by another team at OF&G when compiling the monthly report issued to REAL. Discussions have been held to avoid this going forward.

REAL to review sizing guidelines/rules for use of CCS conformity mark on bagged products

Currently these guidelines are contained in a separate document to the CCS Scheme Rules. The current minimum size for the mark is 18mm in width, which is considered to be too small. REAL will consult on whether this should be increased – the guidelines document will be incorporated into the next version of the scheme rules which are due for review and revision in 2022.

REAL MDWG to consider guidelines/rules for use of conformity mark on bagged products

This is ongoing and will be raised when the next MDWG meeting takes place.

REAL to investigate whether it is possible to capture total tonnage dispatched to each market

This isn't currently collected but it would be beneficial. REAL discussed with the CBs how this could be done. A requirement to report on this could be added into the Scheme Rules, but ease for producers to record this data depends on the potential methods used. It could be reported as tonnage or as a percentage of the total outputs. REAL will consult on this in the new year.

REAL to consider whether re-testing the original samples at the producer's expense is acceptable for 'stable' minimum quality parameters e.g., PTEs

TA explained that REAL is internally investigating the data on PTE failures in the database and will share any relevant findings with the TAC next year.

GK asked SP if they would be able to re-test PTE samples for his own interest, if it was done separately to PAS tests. SP confirmed that the labs do re-tests, but the scheme rules do not allow this in the case of PTE failures. However, SP confirmed re-tests would be possible outside of reporting the sample as a PAS sample, it could be done for further information purposes.

REAL to consider advice from TAC on addressing third-party compost supplier issue

This is ongoing. An internal paper on this issue has been produced and further discussions took place with the CBs. We will be looking to consult on proposed changes to requirements for the use of the CCS certification mark next year and will also consult on proposed changes to requirements for declaring conformity with the scheme.

KN asked if the issue of labelling products as certified is considered in the fertilising product regulations. If for example, there are specifications in this for how growing media had to be labelled, would this be useful in addressing the issues around third-party labelling? GP noted this is something that she will raise with colleagues. SN emphasised that this issue needs careful consideration as it is very important this is implemented properly.

REAL to feed back to MDWG comments raised during discussion on third-party compost suppliers

Similarly, this will be taken forward during the next meeting.

REAL to consider advice from TAC on short/medium term solution to addressing RBP inoculum inhibition issue

Covered later in the agenda.

VC raised a question related to the level of the issue around inoculum inhibition. TA confirmed this would be covered later.

REAL to look into whether sites experiencing inhibition issues are using novel feedstocks.

Covered later in the agenda.

ACTION: REAL to consider advice from TAC regarding labelling requirements in the EU FPR to resolve the issues related to third-party compost suppliers

3. CCS and BCS Updates

A. Scheme Updates

EL reported that as of 29th October 2021, there were 177 certified composting processes. There is approximately 4.04 MT per annum of inputs processed and 1.84 MT per annum of quality compost produced. Since the start of 2021, there have been 15 applicants to the CCS, 0 suspended certificates, and 10 withdrawn. On the BCS, there are 99 certified AD plants. 71 in England, 13 in Scotland, 8 in Wales, and 7 in Northern Ireland. There is approximately 5.11 MT per annum of input processed. Since the start of 2021, there have been 11 applicants, 0 suspended certificates, and 3 withdrawn certificates.

TAC members had no questions on the summary paper, which was circulated ahead of the meeting.

B. Research Hub Updates

SN delivered an update on the current projects of the Research Hub. SN summarised that there were fewer proposals in 2021 than in previous years, and two out of the three shortlisted were selected for funding.

The first on the PRT began as two different proposals that SN collated into one, the background of this project being that the PRT is considered to be more relevant to compost that is going to be used as a growing medium, and less so to compost with an end use as a soil amendment, as such many producers feel the test needs amending. The tender for this project was opened in September and has since closed.

VC asked for clarification as to what the PRT project is seeking to evaluate, what specific characteristic is being investigated, is it seeking to assess what nutrients are of value for growing medium compared to agricultural uses.

SN explained that its aim is to look at the different contaminants that can cause failure and if these are as much of an issue for agriculture, as well as what feedstocks lead to highest concentration of these contaminants. It also will investigate any potential changes that could be made to the test.

TA added that the number of PRT failures is not actually that high, but a failure is an issue for an operator due to the length of time the test takes. In addition to this it is not always clear from the results what has caused the failure, making it difficult to know what changes need to be made on site to address the issue.

KN commented that this has come up in discussions around collection of green waste, as this waste is likely to contain weedkillers, that could be a cause of PRT failures, but there are so many different types of weedkiller, it is difficult to avoid these entering feedstocks.

SN explained further that the producer who was involved in forming the proposal for this project initially had this idea due to noticing a pattern in failures. They only ever experienced failures at a certain time of year and felt that this was an indication the test needed investigation, to see why failures occur.

The second project selected for funding is an evaluation of the potential for improvement of the RBP test and investigation into potential alternatives. This went out of tender last week and will close in January. SN expressed that issues related to the RBP test had been on almost all TAC agendas, so this research is particularly valuable in supporting REAL's response and developing any potential alternatives. SN explained that normally only one project would be selected for funding, but both of these proposals were very strong, and it would have been impossible to choose between the two.

SN raised concerns over the limited responses from producers both in terms of submitting initial proposals and responding to the surveys. SN informed that in the CCS Producers' Forum and BCS Operators' Forum, he had offered to hold a short session to outline projects before the survey so that producers can ask questions and have greater involvement before completing the survey. They can then make an informed judgement when casting their vote.

SN also delivered an update on the status of the Research Hub's second project, the Digestate Data Pack; this project is near completion and will be available by the end of the year. SN commented that TA's summary of the project at the BCS Forum was useful, and the project looks to have been very successful and valuable.

C. Update from the Certification Bodies

OF&G

RL informed that OF&G are still going through some staff changes, with three more certification officers being trained for one scheme as well as changes to inspection staff. RL also explained that OF&G have had two complaints since the last meeting. The first, on BCS, was related to odour when spreading, the operator always checks wind direction before spreading but in this case, it changed during. The investigation concluded and this has been signed off.

The second, on CCS, is also an odour complaint but is more complicated. RL expressed that the complainant is frustrated, and OF&G have requested he only communicates with them by email. RL noted that the complainant has copied in MPs to correspondence, but he has not seen any response from MPs. RL also detailed that OF&G have conducted one spot inspection of the site and another is arranged before the end of the year, however RL added from his perspective, the results of this are unlikely to satisfy the complainant as they did not find excessive non-compliances at the last inspection. RL added that the complainant has submitted a FOI request to the EA.

KN commented that the local area EA team have thoroughly investigated the odour complaint and from her perspective, there was not much more that could be done. KN also raised concerns about the continual use of a drone by the complainant. KN felt that OF&G and the EA should close their investigations and should the complainant wish to escalate this and complain about how the EA has handled this, then that is up to them.

ACTION: OF&G to consider comments from the EA regarding odour complaint and a CCS site
ACTION: REAL to consider feedback from OF&G and the EA regarding CCS complaint

NSF

SA reported that NSF have received no complaints since the last TAC. There have been a few changes of staff and they are training a new CCS accessor.

ACL

NJ reported that there have been no staff changes and no complaints since the last TAC.

D. Update from the Approved Laboratories

SP explained that there were not many updates, but couriers continue to be problematic. There have been issues with courier companies changing their systems and using agency drivers. Labs in some cases are unable to proceed with analysis if the sample is overly delayed. SP expressed that this is likely to be a continuing issue especially as courier companies need a licence to carry ABP materials so there is a limited number of companies you can use.

GK and JC added that this had been raised in the producers'/ operators' forums, multiple instances of delays or missed collections. JC also raised that in the BCS Operators' Forum, there was confusion over what was acceptable under the scheme in the event of delays or missed pick-ups.

E. Update from the CCS Producers' Representative

GK delivered a summary of the CCS Producers' Forum in October.

The current chair of the CCS and BCS forums announced she was stepping down and that any suggestions for a new chair should be sent to GP. A summary of the PRT Research Hub project was delivered to producers. The process of gathering evidence to inform changes producers want made to the PAS explained. The amended 2020 cost/fee comparison document was presented and met

with support. GK commented that forum attendance was limited but was not notably less than usual. GK summarised discussion held over the third-party labelling issue: he advised producers to make clear when their responsibility ends in terms of PAS 100 compliance. Though concerns were raised at the forum that advising customers on what they can do with compost involves the producer too much.

Identification of compostable packaging in the feedstock was raised as an issue with producers expressing that big logos or packaging coated in one colour is needed for clarity. Subtlety or looking as much like plastic as possible is not beneficial for the composting industry. This also fed into the feedback producers gave to GP on the CMCS labelling guidance document and on the CMCS logos.

SN attended and delivered updates on the Research Hub, which was useful and there was support for the idea of a session explaining proposals before producers vote. A discussion was held on limits for levels of stones in PAS 100; many producers feel that the limit is overly strict when considering compost that will be going to agriculture. One producer attending the forum is also a potato farmer and raised that levels of stones are irrelevant for his crop. Producers showed support for research into acceptable levels of stones for different markets.

Also, a similar discussion was held on *E. coli*, some producers are frustrated at the *E. coli* limits, especially green waste compost producers, as there is no pathogen risk in the input and these sites are often open windrow, so any pathogens come from exposure to e.g., birds. It was raised in discussion that *E. coli* is used as an indicator of other pathogens and to show the sanitisation phase has been effective. Though overall, there was frustration at the strict limits despite it being acceptable to spread manure or slurry on fields.

KN responded that the *E. coli* limit is particularly important, and this is a British Safety Standard; it is there to protect the end user and the standard should not be eroded. KN also raised that the comparison composters should hold themselves to is peat, rather than manure, and peat does not have high *E. coli* levels. ST and SN added that *E. coli* is important as an indicator that sanitisation has occurred, and that this is what enables compost producers to sell their compost as a product, this changes the holding periods and restrictions the producers are subject to. GK agreed that being able to sell compost as a product is hugely valuable to producers and safety for end users is important, and that a reminder of this message is beneficial in addressing producers' frustrations.

F. Update from the BCS Operators' Representative

JC delivered a summary of the recent BCS Operators' Forum.

SN attended and delivered an overview of the process by which research projects are selected and how operators can be assisted in pulling together ideas into a proposal. TA also attended to discuss progress on the Digestate Data Pack, which was well received by operators. One attendee was pleased to see the inclusion of microplastics in the outcomes of the project as this was a concern he was going to raise in the forum. As usual, attendance was limited, but it has been steady at recent forums. One operator raised the potential market for solid digestate as a peat alternative in horticulture, this had been put forward for QP revision. Operators felt that if there were insufficient evidence for this market to be included in the QP that a research proposal could be submitted to the Research Hub on this. SN noted that there had been a previous proposal on this topic, but there is no reason this proposal couldn't be resubmitted.

Several operators had experienced issues with couriers as mentioned by the labs previously in the meeting. Operators had found labs were not testing samples that arrived late and there was confusion over what was a scheme requirement and what was a lab decision or operator decision.

GP confirmed that REAL have been discussing this issue with the labs and CBs and will be issuing a clarification note in the next bimonthly update.

JC then outlined discussion relating to reseed and pasteurisation. JC explained that an operator with a front-end pasteurised site had experienced some of the biology inside their digester dying due to high temperatures in summer. In order to reseed, they added some unpasteurised slurry, which meant their certificate was suspended. Given that under ABP regulations it doesn't need to be pasteurised, this seemed slightly unfair. This is an area that needs to be considered in future reviews or updates to standards.

A reminder was delivered to operators to schedule their audits as soon as possible to allow for time to address non-conformances before expiry of the current certificate, but JC informed there are cases in which operators are the ones chasing to try and organise an audit.

Operators had felt that it is difficult to keep track of when REAL (and REA) meetings and trainings are taking place and suggested that a centralised calendar would be useful, as this information is currently quite fragmented.

There was discussion of the RBP inoculum inhibition issue. Most operators are managing this okay through communication with REAL and they welcome the introduction of the new form.

REAL sought views from operators on why attendance at the BCS Understanding Test Results webinar was low. BCS forum attendees suggested that they review the comms sent out before the next webinar. This led into further discussion around operators' roles and responsibilities, and it was considered that a named PAS 110 competent/responsible would be useful and this should be included in discussions for future reviews and revisions of the standards.

ACTION: REAL to clarify rules/guidance concerning couriers in upcoming comms to producers

ACTION: REAL to consider comments from TAC regarding PAS 110 pasteurisation requirements in the context of seeding a digester with unpasteurised manure/slurry for next PAS 110 review

4. Technical Issues

A. Dispatching non-conforming material

GP informed this is in relation to Section 22 (notifying the recipient and regulator if dispatching non-conforming material) in the draft CCS position on Technical Requirements, which had been distributed to TAC members for comment. One such comment suggested that "When a compost producer notifies the recipient and regulator, should they also include what measures have been taken to ensure the compost can be used?" REAL wish to seek the TAC's views on this.

GK queried if this was necessary, as to dispatch non-conforming material, the compost producer will have had to apply to the EA for a deployment. FD added that compost cannot be sent out while awaiting test results, unlike digestate, and therefore, the producer would know conformity before dispatch. Meaning that they would already be aware that the material would have to be under exemption and the person they are selling it to would need a licence to accept waste. They cannot legally send non-conforming compost to someone without a deployment, and this would have to detail why the compost had failed and what is being done to address it.

ACTION: REAL to consider comments and advice from TAC on section in CCS Position on Technical Requirements related to dispatching non-conforming compost

B. RBP Inoculum Inhibition

TA delivered a summary of the current status and management of the issue. He explained that invalid test results occur due to compounds in the sample inhibiting the inoculum, meaning no gas is produced in the first 5 days of the test, rendering the test invalid and the operator therefore cannot demonstrate a pass or fail. The minority of sites are experiencing this issue (16/100) and it has occurred at both approved labs. Sites experiencing inhibition take a mixture of feedstocks but in most instances take food waste and high nitrogen feedstocks, such as poultry litter or fish waste.

The current procedure for managing this issue is as follows: when inhibition is experienced, the operator will inform REAL and discuss their results, feedstock composition, and process parameters. REAL will then issue the site with the new own site inoculum form and a code. The lab will then run a parallel test of the normal sample with the own inoculum sample. The own inoculum often does not experience inhibition as it is better acclimated to the sample. The results of this parallel testing must be shared with REAL. After a minimum of two parallel tests, REAL will issue a different code and approve the site for use of their own inoculum only going forward. REAL are also currently conducting a comparison of the inocula used by each lab and are working to raise operator awareness of the issue through scheme updates and the BCS Understanding Test Results webinar, which covers RBP inhibition.

TA asked the TAC for advice on any further actions REAL should be taking in the short term to address this issue. There were no suggestions. REAL will continue managing the issue as currently.

C. RPS 241

GP informed the EA had recently published a regulatory position statement which they consulted on earlier in 2021. RPS 241 allows operators to accept waste codes not included in the Quality Protocols instead of the Wastes Not Otherwise Specified. Several codes have been re-coded and REAL is currently producing a technical guidance document to clearly show the current QP permissible codes and the updates in RPS 241. The updated codes will be included in the new Resources' Frameworks.

RL raised that caution needs to be taken in the wording of this guidance as some sites will have wastes on their permits which are not contained in the QP.

ACTION: REAL to consider advice from TAC on technical guidance concerning RPS 241

D. Peat moss use in the PRT

TA explained that the phasing out of peat by 2030 is an issue due to the use of peat in the plant response test. Labs have reported that there has been a decrease in the number of suppliers, but costs are currently stable. Coir is a potential replacement, but further investigation into alternatives is necessary. This issue will be taken to the PRT TWG in 2022.

5. Any Other Business

A. Quality Protocol Revision

GP confirmed that since the last TAC, REAL have signed the T&Cs and confirmed our place on the Task and Finish Group for both the CQP and ADQP revisions. The first meetings of these groups will take place in late December.

B. Fertilising Product Regulations

LD delivered an update from DEFRA on the progress of the FPR. The consultation on this has been delayed so there has been limited development since the last TAC. The Nutrient Management Expert

Group have nearly completed their task and will deliver their report by March 2022 and a full consultation of options will be held in 2022. The final framework will be finished following this.

JC queried if there was any update on how the QP/Resources Framework and the FPR will work together. LD answered that this is not yet set, but will be worked on from December to February and there is a new member of staff joining the team to work on this who is very familiar with the QPs.

VC added that the new regulation the fertiliser team is working on has a focus on sustainability, its aims prioritise decreasing nutrient pollution. The consultation next year will propose accepting the fundamentals of the EU regulations, but the future of these still needs consideration. SN commented that sustainability used to mean a focus on economic sustainability, but environmentalism is a growing area. Sustainability is likely to be at the forefront of most updates to regulations or standards and this will bring challenges. ST added that the Food Standards Agency working group was set up to investigate the potential implications of Net Zero for food safety, for example, chemical contaminants and allergens are new areas being investigated. Balancing food safety and sustainability is likely to be a real challenge in the near future.

C. Biochar

GK had been approached by a biochar company regarding the potential of having a plant on composting sites to create biochar from compost oversize. GK had explained to the company that this would be challenging as oversize is still waste but wanted to seek advice from the TAC on whether biochar is a real potential use for oversize.

KN suggested this was an issue that the EA would have to take away to consider but initially, it appears that this could be a candidate for a waste framework or QP. GK agreed that a standard would be necessary as currently oversize contains a high level of plastic contamination and biochar plants will have to consider the quality of their feedstocks, they would need a standard to meet.

FD raised that one issue with biochar is that it is created through incineration of waste, so there are lots of restrictions on the process, it is not just a waste issue but also an industrial emissions issue. RL added there is high levels of misinformation surrounding biochar. RL explained further that when used as a soil amendment, it has a good impact on soils in poor condition, but on a good soil it can make it worse, as it can lock up minerals. SN agreed that it is a misunderstood area, partly as it is a diverse material, it has varying characteristics depending on what it is made from. Research thus far has been somewhat over optimistic as to the benefits of biochar and so greater research is needed.

KN pointed out that oversize should be cleaner in the next few years due to ongoing Environment Agency actions, for example post-consumer wood waste is no longer allowed in collections. KN also suggested this may be a topic that the energy sector is interested in, and that drawing out a roadmap of how to address each separate issue may be beneficial, a meeting outside of this group with herself and a colleague was suggested.

GK will feed back to the biochar company.

D. Meeting Format Changes

GP asked if all attendees preferred scheme updates to be sent in a summary paper beforehand rather than delivered in the meeting, which would likely cut the meeting down by an hour.

All agreed this was useful and saved time.

ACTION: REAL to continue circulating summary paper going forward and reduce TAC meeting duration

END

Actions:

- REAL to consider advice from TAC regarding labelling requirements in the EU FPR to resolve the issues related to third-party compost suppliers
- OF&G to consider comments from the EA regarding odour complaint and a CCS site
- REAL to consider feedback from OF&G and the EA regarding CCS complaint
- REAL to clarify rules/guidance concerning couriers in upcoming comms to producers
- REAL to consider comments from TAC regarding PAS 110 pasteurisation requirements in the context of seeding a digester with unpasteurised manure/slurry for next PAS 110 review
- REAL to consider comments and advice from TAC on section in CCS Position on Technical Requirements related to dispatching non-conforming compost
- REAL to consider advice from TAC on technical guidance concerning RPS 241
- REAL to continue circulating summary paper going forward and reduce TAC meeting duration