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Organic Action Plan Group for Northern Ireland

Mr Christopher Stopes was appointed as the Chair of the Organic Action Plan Group for Northern Ireland (OAPGNI; formerly the Organic Lead Group) in November 2004. Mr Stopes is an organic consultant, and brings significant experience of organic food and farming to the position.

He has a well-established and widely respected reputation within the UK organic sector, and was responsible for the production of the report Organic Farming in Northern Ireland: A Development Strategy (2001), upon which the establishment of the Organic Lead Group is partly based. Mr Stopes has contributed to the development of organic policy for the European Commission, UK Government Departments and private clients.

The OAPGNI met for the first time on 21 February 2005. The agenda and minutes from the meeting, together with the Group's agreed Terms of Reference, can be found online at www.dardni.gov.uk/core/dard0220.htm

Minutes from the meeting held on 19 April 2005 will also be posted there.

The Members of the Group nominated from local organic stakeholders are listed below.

They will be working with the Chair towards the future inclusion of organic processing and retail interests on the Group.

| Nominee | Organisation | Sector |
|----------------|---|-------------------|
| Jim Twine | Soil Association Certification Ltd | Certification |
| Michael Mullan | North West Organic Coop | Producer Group |
| Roy McCracken | Emerald Organic | Organic Dairy |
| John McCormick | Ulster Organic Vegetable Producers | Producer Group |
| David Laughlin | Ulster Farmers Union | Farming Union |
| Richard Jacobs | Organic Farmers and Growers | Certification |
| Rex Humphrey | Northern Ireland representative on ACOS | Organic Standards |

Organic
Action
Plan
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for
Northern
Ireland

What Do You Want from Organic Food & Farming Research?

If you didn't manage to get to the recent public workshop to put forward your views on the R&D needs for organic farming and food in Northern Ireland, you can submit your ideas and opinions on-line by going to www.sac.ac.uk/research/contact/whatorganicresearch/
Submissions should be made by **12th May 2005**.

Sward growth measurement

In conjunction with the Northern Ireland Plant Testing Station, the technologists at Greenmount Campus are examining changes in sward composition and yield of grass/white clover swards during the growing season.

As part of the project, some of the information may be available to growers on a weekly basis via e-mail and on the Rural Portal www.ruralni.gov.uk

If you would be interested in being part of a pilot group receiving this information, please forward your e-mail address to Charlotte Moore at charlotte.moore@dardni.gov.uk

A comparison of weed numbers in organic barley and oat fields

Colm Reavey, Aisling Lavery¹, Peter Mercer, Applied Plant Science Division, DARD

The main weed control strategies used in organic cereal growing consist of direct mechanical methods such as tining or husbandry practices such as stale seedbeds, crop rotations and the sowing of cultivars suited for organic production. It is possible that some species or cultivars may be better suited for weed control because of their growth habit or other physiological factors.

However, it is also known that plants of some species have the ability to produce and release chemicals that suppress the germination and growth of weed species in the surrounding area – a so-called allelopathic effect. In spring cereals it has been reported that oats have increased competitive abilities that may be due to allelopathy.

The inclusion of plants with allelopathic properties in crop rotations may have the potential to aid weed control, and it is important that research is carried out into any such properties, as poor weed control is one of the biggest factors limiting yield in organic cereal production.

In 2004, under the Sentinus Scheme of the Nuffield foundation, a small survey was undertaken by the Weed Section of the Applied Plant science Division to identify the composition of weed growth in organic spring barley and spring oat crops in N. Ireland.

Weed species from selected fields were individually identified and separated and the plant numbers recorded. Plants were also dried to 0% moisture and their dry weights recorded - lower plant dry weight is an indication of lesser plant vigour.

There was a tendency toward lower weed numbers in the oat crops than in the barley crops (Fig. 1). Plant dry weights were also lower (Fig. 2). These findings tend to support the presence of an allelopathic response, although they must be qualified by the small number of farms sampled (9).

However, the trends are encouraging and merit further investigation. If any growers, who are growing organic cereals in the coming season, would like to participate in the ongoing trials they should make contact with Applied Plant Science Division, through Adrian Saunders (028 9442 6765) at Greenmount Campus.

¹Aisling Lavery is a student at Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry, and her help in the project is gratefully acknowledged.

Fig. 1. Effect of crop on number of all weeds

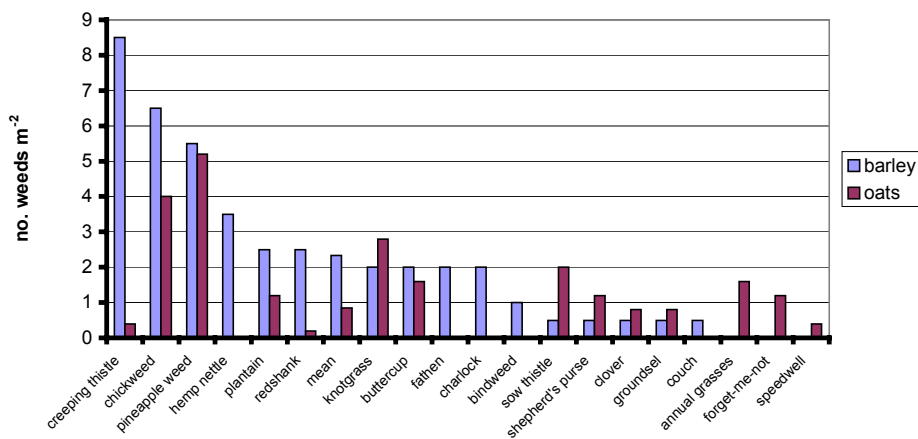
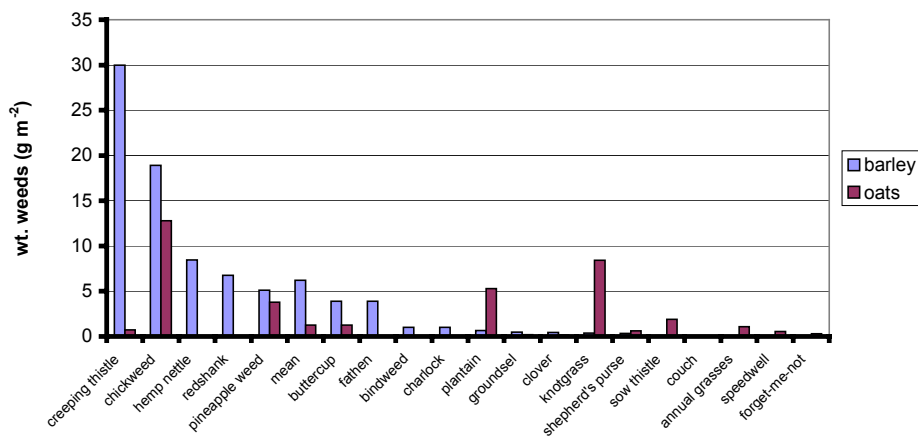


Fig. 2. Effect of crop on weight of all weeds



Atlantic Organics Ltd

Atlantic Organics is a new cross-border, joint venture development company set up by three leading organic organisations in the region: The Organic Centre, Leitrim Organic Farmers and North West Organic Coop. It is supporting organic food production in the North and West of Ireland by developing and marketing new products based on locally produced organic ingredients and will harness organic producer investment through a new business model.

Over the next two years it will develop a range of added-value foods such as prepared convenience meals, ready-to-go meals, and speciality foods including cured meats.

A number of products, using mainly beef, lamb, vegetables, herbs, and also including cereals, pork and poultry where appropriate, will be test marketed in 2005, the best of which should be in production and in the shops in 2006.

Loughry Campus of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, has been engaged to assist the food product development process.

For further information about the company contact:

Siobhan Morris

Atlantic Organics, 2 Foreglen Road, Killaloo, Londonderry, BT47 3TP

Tel: 028 7133 7433 email: siobhan@atlanticorganics.com

Homoeopathy – what is it ?

Homeopathy offers a non-drug alternative to preventing or treating disease, but can also be used alongside conventional medicine. It is gentle and non-toxic, leaving no residues. No resistance is built up and it is potentially cost effective.

It involves giving a very small dose of a substance which in a larger dose would cause symptoms similar to the illness to be treated. There are many homoeopathic remedies derived from plants, animals and minerals, often from substances which in normal concentrations are very toxic, e.g. arsenic, deadly nightshade, snake venom.

Deciding on the most appropriate homoeopathic remedy for a particular illness involves matching the symptoms caused by the remedy as closely as possible to those of the illness. However it is just as important to take into account all symptoms including those which may appear to be unrelated to the illness.

Organic producers are encouraged to use homoeopathy where appropriate but conventional medicines can be used. Some organic livestock producers now rely almost entirely on homoeopathy to treat their animals rarely needing to use antibiotics or other conventional drugs. Homoeopathy is not a cure-all and is no substitute for good nutrition and husbandry.

During the early part of the year, 30 people participated in a three day practical course 'Homoeopathy at Wellie Level' at Greenmount. Everyone who attended has increased the use of homoeopathy on their farm. The trainers had a very good knowledge of the subject and presented the information in an easy to follow way.

If you have any interest in attending a course on homoeopathy in the future contact Susan Cassley (028 9442 6873) and add your name to the waiting list.

Potato varieties for organic or reduced input production in Northern Ireland

Louise R. Cooke and George Little, Applied Plant Science Division, DARD

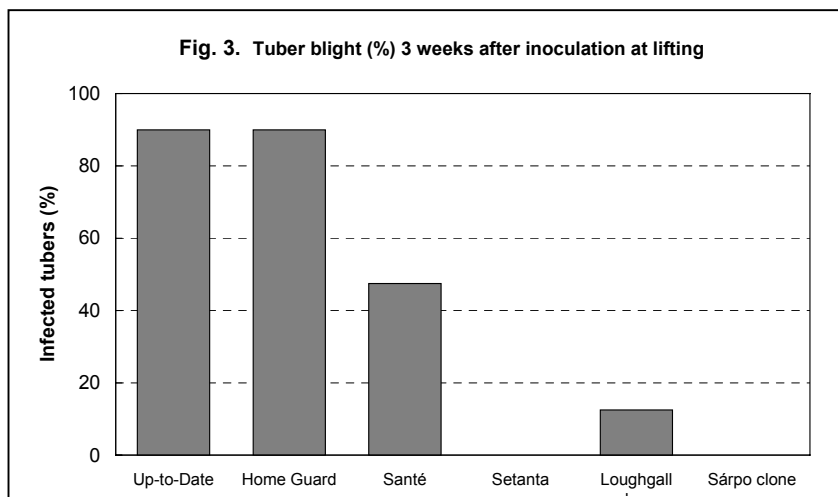
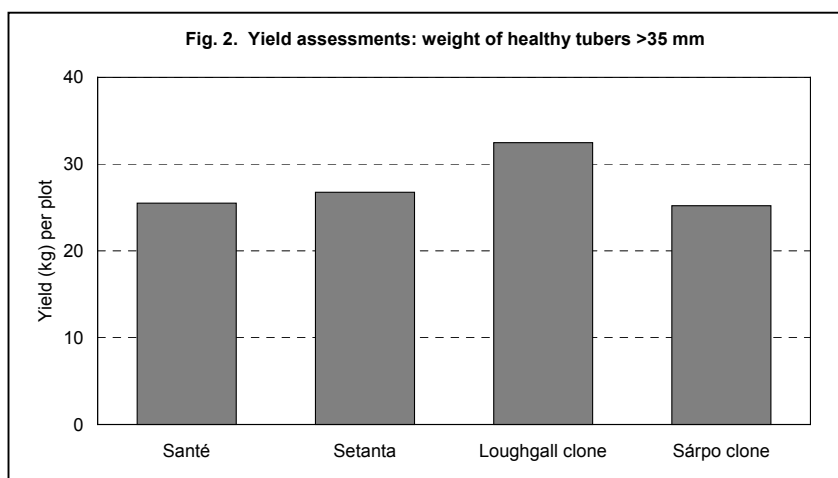
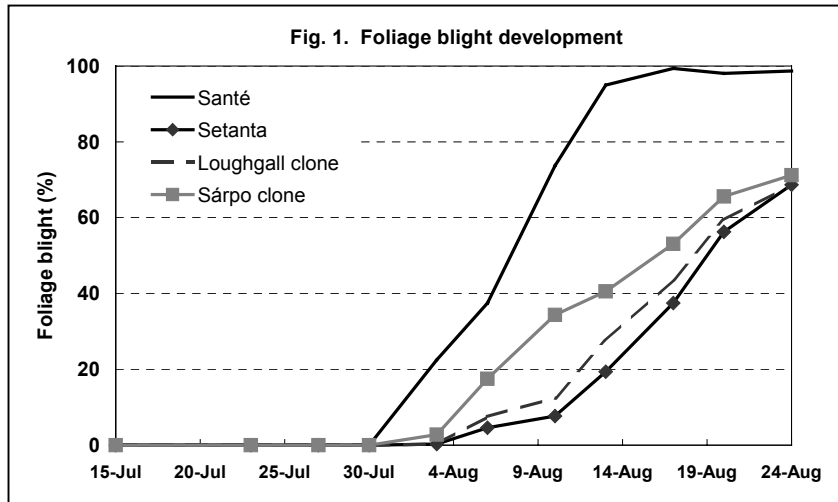
Blight is potentially the biggest problem for organic potato producers in Northern Ireland. Potato varieties with partial blight resistance are available, but how do they perform here? To help growers identify suitable varieties, DARD has been carrying out trials at Greenmount and Newforge. The trials at Newforge are designed to assess varietal performance under high blight pressure to see what can happen in the most severe conditions when no fungicides are applied.

Between 2001 and 2003, 12 varieties from a range of sources were tested. These included several Sárpo varieties, which were bred in Hungary and are being developed by the Sárvári Research Trust in Bangor, North Wales; these have proved the most resistant, but their red skin colour may not appeal to the local market. The variety Milagro, bred at DARD's Northern Ireland Horticultural & Plant Breeding Station, Loughgall, also showed potential and stored well. However, Santé, which is currently widely grown as an organic variety in the UK, became severely infected in our trials.

In 2004, we evaluated some different varieties including Setanta from Teagasc, and clonal selections from Sárpo (87-4-1546) and Loughgall (L4603/2). By the second week in August in the field at Newforge, Santé's foliage was almost completely destroyed by blight, but the Loughgall and Sárpo clones and Setanta were much less severely infected (Fig. 1).

The haulm was destroyed at the end of August and the trial lifted in late September. Marketable yield, assessed in early December after removal of blighted tubers, varied markedly between the different varieties with the Loughgall clone yielding significantly more than any other (Fig. 2). Tuber blight is the most problematic phase of the disease and was evaluated by direct inoculation of healthy tubers immediately after lifting. Ninety percent of tubers of susceptible control varieties developed blight, 50% of Santé, but only 12% of tubers of the Loughgall clone and none of the Sárpo clone or Setanta were infected (Fig. 3).

The trial showed the potential of blight-resistant varieties to perform even under extreme infection pressure.



Organic Farming (Conversion of Animal Housing) Scheme

On 4 January 2005 Ian Pearson, Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, announced the extension of the OF(CoAH)S deadline to 31 March 2006, to enable the completion of approved work and associated payment. At 1 April 2005, 59 projects had been approved by DARD, to a value of £1.65m, with a further 9 projects currently under consideration. If all 9 are accepted the scheme's budget will be fully committed. However, it is not too late to enter your application, but you must act quickly as we may be forced to close admissions in the very near future.

Organic Farming Scheme update

The Organic Farming Scheme has latterly attracted new applications from producers who are in receipt of funding under the Organic Farming (Conversion of Animal Housing) Scheme. Thus at 1 April 2005 there were 85 farmers participating in the OFS, farming some 5,015 hectares.

New applicants are reminded that the five year minimum participation in the scheme begins on the date DARD receives your valid application to join the scheme, rather than the date on which you started farming organically or the date of your organic sector body certificate.

To be considered for the scheme, applications must be received by DARD within six months of the issue of your organic certificate.

Additional land can be entered into the OFS on agreement of a conversion plan with an organic certification body and the receipt of an organic certificate.

This land cannot be added to an existing scheme entry – a new application to the scheme must be made for all additional land. Previously entered land must continue to be farmed organically until all land has completed its five year minimum participation.

Greenmount Organic Unit update

First Organic Beef finished at Greenmount

Having been farming organically since early 2002 it gave us satisfaction to sell the first finished organic beef cattle from the organic unit at Greenmount recently.

The suckler herd was established with a batch of Angus x Limousin heifers which were purchased in calf to a Limousin bull. They calved shortly after arriving at Greenmount and as they had not been managed organically for 3 months prior to calving their calves did not qualify as organic. Three of the heifer calves were retained as replacements for the herd and are now calving down to a Limousin bull.

The calves born during May and June 2003 were by the Aberdeen Angus bull, Rawburn Elliott, ranked in the top 1% of the breed. The calves averaged 219 kg at weaning on 25 March 2004. The average DLWG from birth to weaning of the heifers was 1.08 kg and of the steers was 1.12 kg. The calves were fed 1.5 kg / head / day of home grown cereals with a protein balancer and minerals from housing to just after weaning. The protein balancer comprised peas, non-GM full fat soya and prairie meal. The overall protein content of the ration was 16% CP.

They grazed on grass white clover swards from turnout on 29 April until housing on 20 October 2004. Concentrate feeding commenced on 1 November and was increased to 3 kg / head / day of home grown cereals and straights.

The heifers were slaughtered on 10 December. Average DLWG from birth to slaughter was 0.92 kg producing average carcass weights of 280 kg. They were classified 1 U4L, 3 R4L, 1 O+3 and 1 O+4H. With an average price of 236.5 p/kg they realised £663.

The steers were fed until 28 January 2005. Average DLWG from birth to slaughter was 1.02 kg producing average carcass weights of 337 kg. They were classified 1 R3 and 7 R4L. With an average price of 250 p / kg they realised £842.

The cattle were sold to ABP in Newry who require farm quality assurance status in addition to full organic status. Cattle should be booked in well in advance.

More information on the financial performance of the cattle and sheep on the unit will be published in the next bulletin.

2004 Calves perform well

Many readers will have seen the suckled calves on the Greenmount organic unit during the open day July last year. During 2003 the cows were bred by AI using the Aberdeen Angus bull Rawburn Elliott and later in the season swept with the Limousin bull Dyfri Sundance. In 2004 the cows calved from mid May to mid July.

Cows and calves were housed on 22 October 2004 and fed silage with a customised mineral. The calves were weaned on 17 February 2005, just prior to the open afternoon in the beef house. No supplementary feed has been given this year. Calf performance has been very good with heifers DLWG birth to weaning 1.12 kg and steers DLWG 1.31 kg. Weaning weights were 331 and 354 kg for heifers and steers respectively.

Calves continued to thrive well post-weaning and we look forward to getting them out to grass at the time of writing. Although there is plenty of grass on the unit conditions are still somewhat soft underfoot.

Greenmount Cattle Shed

The new cattle shed at the Organic Unit at Greenmount is now nearing the completion of its first winter in operation leaving us in a position to make some assessment of it.

Generally speaking the shed provides a healthy environment with good ventilation yet draught free and providing plenty of light. Cattle also appear to be very comfortable and content making good use of the bedded area.

The self-locking feed barriers have proved to be very useful, minimising stress for both man and beast when cattle are being tested and other handling is necessary.

A lot of thought went into location and design of water troughs and to date there has been no fouling in drinkers, no frozen pipes and no leakages onto the straw bedding.

Straw usage in the house has been greater than anticipated. Ten round bales were being used per week costing about £120. It is possible that if a straw chopper had been used that the straw requirement would have been reduced.

To try and reduce bedding costs from the middle of February the shed was cleaned out and a layer of woodchip about 30 cm (1 foot) deep was spread over 6 of the 8 bays of the shed at a cost of £450.

Since then it has been grubbed twice and until now the cattle have stayed clean and dry although the bed now looks dirty. The cost of straw bedding for the same period would have been almost double for this period and the labour involved would have been greater.

It may have worked even better if all 8 bays had been bedded with woodchip – the remaining 2 bays of straw may have impeded drainage away from the woodchip.

Using woodchip instead of straw will mean that the farmyard manure will require a considerably longer period of composting, but overall woodchip would certainly appear to be worth considering as a useful alternative to straw.

Caliente mustard

Horticulture technologists at Greenmount have been growing Caliente mustard green manure in a glasshouse and in the open. When incorporated, water interacts with plant components to release a gas which it is claimed can give a degree of control of soil borne diseases and weed seeds. It may have applications in organic production, but although it apparently does not increase clubroot, as it is a brassica this may still have to be taken into account in rotation design.

On a lighter note ... healthier rats ?

A new study by the Danish Institute of Agricultural Sciences has concluded that rats do better on an organic diet. It found that the organically fed rats were measurably healthier; they slept better, their immune system was stronger and they were less inclined to obesity ...

Web watch

- The **HDRA organic weed management website** aims to be a primary resource on weed management for organic farms, reporting on the latest weed research and techniques and acting as a focal point for farmers and researchers to share their experiences. The web addresses for the site are:
www.hdra.org.uk/organicweeds or www.organicweeds.org.uk
 - Submit your views on **R&D needs for organic farming and food in Northern Ireland** by 12th May at www.sac.ac.uk/research/contact/whatorganicresearch/
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What's on ?

- 2-day **Course** – ‘Introduction to Organic Production’ - Greenmount Campus, Antrim 17 and 24 May – to book a place ring Charlene on 028 9442 6704
- 2-day Organic **Study Tour** - June
ring David Alexander 028 9442 6614 for details
- Horticulture **Focus Farm visit** - George MacDonald - 28 June, 2pm, Claudy
ring Adrian Saunders 028 9442 6765 for details
- Organic **Dairy farm visit** featuring Grass/clover variety project - Raymond Pollock, Bready - 23 June, 1:30pm - ring David Alexander 028 9442 6614 for details
- **Greenmount Organic Unit farm walk**, featuring cereals – 21 July, 2pm
ring Adrian Saunders on 028 9442 6765 for details

Contributions from: David Alexander, Stuart Beeson, Louise Cooke, Aisling Lavery, George Little, Peter Mercer, Charlotte Moore, Nigel Moore, Colm Reavey, Adrian Saunders

www.ruralni.gov.uk/bussys/organic

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