

Press release: The Great Farm Challenge – Educating the next generation of farmers

Young farmers with outstanding ideas for running a successful farm whilst caring for the environment and local water and air quality have been awarded the prestigious Great Farm Challenge Award 2019.

Ideas brought forward in this year's competition included using a tramline to reduce the risk of water pollution and methods to stop cattle from drinking directly out of rivers to avoid damage to river banks.

Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Farming team, the Environment Agency and water companies for the areas involved – Severn Trent, Anglian Water and United Utilities – have awarded students from agricultural colleges from across the East of England, the North West and the West Midlands with the prestigious prize.

Regional award ceremonies were held last week in recognition of over 150 young agricultural students' collaborative and innovative solutions to future farming.

The young farmers worked together on projects to assess and address the impact of different farm practices on their local natural environment and farm business. These projects were then developed into plans and presented to a panel of judges, with the participants demonstrating how they would care for the environment and run a successful farm whilst protecting local water and air quality.

This year Natural England are proud to announce that the regional winners and runners-up impressed the judging panel comprising representatives from Natural England, Environment Agency, water companies and Young Farmers' Clubs with their plans for managing a successful farm. The young farmers focused on minimising run-off from pesticides, nutrients and suspended solids such as sediment and algae that can be problematic for aquatic life, whilst also looking at ways to improve air quality and use water wisely on the farm.

Geoff Sansome, Natural England's Head of Agriculture, said:

It's great to see so many young people engaged and positive about the future of farming. It's even better that they so clearly understand the challenges of diffuse water pollution. This is good farming that is good for the environment, planned at a landscape scale – this is the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan being put into practice.

The students have gone above and beyond to find practical solutions for protecting water and air quality, assets and skills that will

serve them well as tomorrow's successful farmers.

Using a case study farm, some of the agricultural students discovered the management of tramlines could be an effective way to reduce the risk of sediment and phosphorus pollution of surface water. These young farmers presented their plans to change the direction of the tramlines to reduce the amount of sediment and pesticides moving into the water course from crop spraying, and advised the farmer to plough across slopes to avoid tramlines moving down slope. To avoid soil run-off into the water course, the students also proposed adding grass or vegetative buffer strips or crop parallel to the water course to catch sediments and pesticides.

James Eckely, National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs Chief Officer, said:

NFYFC is delighted that Leicestershire Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs chairman and dairy farmer Alistair Hughes was part of the judging panel for an event that challenges young agricultural students to find solutions to improve water and air quality on farms.

YFC members are aware of the challenges, demands and opportunities ahead for their farming future and NFYFC commends the achievements of this collaborative project.

Notably, one college discovered the farm had not conducted soil testing in 15 years. Soil testing should be conducted every three years and is important for efficient nutrient management and for the assessment and minimisation of pollution of surface and ground water to conserve water quality, caused by agricultural practices.

Others looked at ways to prevent cattle from drinking directly from the river to avoid poaching and river bank damage, and came up with the solution of using water bays for cattle to drink from instead of the river.

The students noted that farmers could seek advice from their local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officers to find out what grants are available to help fund some of these actions.

Madeleine Gardner, Environment Agency Environmental Specialist, said:

I'm delighted to see the Environment Agency and Catchment Sensitive Farming team working alongside water companies and agricultural colleges across England to reward young agriculturalists for thinking about ways to protect local water quality.

I'm proud to be a part of the Great Farm Challenge and help to educate the next generation of farmers to think sustainably, and by sharing good water quality practices we're reducing the issue of

poor water quality – improving the local environment and farm businesses.

This year marks the 8th Great Farm Challenge. Since the Challenge started in 2011, over 1,170 students and land managers have engaged and got involved in improving water and air quality through best practice on farms.

Catchment Sensitive Farming is a partnership between Natural England, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Environment Agency.

The Great Farm Challenge is a joint partnership, led by Natural England, Defra, Environment Agency and regional water companies Severn Trent, Anglian Water and United Utilities. As a collective, the partnership continues to nurture the next generation of farmers and encourage strategic solutions for our young farmers to carry throughout their careers.

Richard Reynolds, Anglian Water's Senior Agronomist, said:

The Great Farm Challenge is a really important initiative and provides the farmers and advisors of the future with a practical and rewarding experience that will help develop their skills and techniques for protecting the water environment.

It is vital that the farming sector focuses on issues like pesticide run-off, nutrient management and watercourse protection if we are to continue delivering world-class produce whilst protecting drinking water sources and wildlife.

I was really impressed with the standard of the students taking part in the challenge and I look forward to working with them in the future. Huge congratulations to the winners and everyone else who took part. It's important that we continue to support up and coming students and the Great Farm Challenge is an excellent way to do so.

Una McBride, Agricultural Advisor at Severn Trent, said:

We're delighted to have been part of the Great Farm Challenge for the past eight years. It's a great way for us to engage directly with the farmers of the future, raising their awareness of the whole water journey, from farm to tap and, the opportunities for farming businesses to thrive whilst protecting our water environment. It's really encouraging to see so many of our future farmers so enthused about incorporating good water quality practices in to their own farming systems.

Clare Bullen, Strategy Development Manager at United Utilities, said:

We're delighted to be involved in this challenge as it is a great way to influence the next generation of farmers about how they can help us to care for the environment without impacting on their farm business.

By creating the awareness of good water quality practices we will hopefully avoid problems in the future which could lead to increased water treatment costs and potentially affect the bill paying customer.

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[Find out more about how we've been educating young farmers to improve water quality for all here.](#)