

SQC
Certification
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Combining audits streamlines the business of arable farming

Scottish Quality Crops (SQC) growers are benefiting from streamlined auditing following the appointment of new certification body, Food Integrity Assurance (FIA).

FIA, which was set up by the cooperative support hub, SAOS, in 2022 to offer devolved, Scotland-centric auditing, is now able to certify for four assurance schemes – Scottish Quality Crops, Quality Meat Scotland (QMS), Wildlife Estates Scotland and most recently, LEAF.

Reducing unnecessary burden on SQC members has been a key mission for Managing Director, Teresa Dougall, since she assumed the role 18 months ago:

“SQC is a co-operative of agricultural stakeholders, run by farmers for farmers, and our priority is to support our growers to access the best markets and, where possible, profit potential. Assurance is core to this, and it brings huge benefits. We are aware however that with 50% of SQC members also QMS Cattle & Sheep members, and some oat growers now required to meet LEAF standards, there is often duplication across schemes, and a question we have heard repeatedly from our members is how can we reduce this?

“It is about listening to our membership, and through the appointment of FIA last year we have been able to work alongside them to widen the scope of services available. And, importantly, FIA shares a similar cooperative ethos, they have a regional understanding of farming in Scotland and they brought with them a vast range of experience and knowledge in assurance and certification.

While our SQC assurance scheme must always be our priority, it means we can work with FIA to assist in the provision of joint audits where possible and support our growers.”

In the last 12 months, FIA has recruited 20 full-time staff, qualified across four certification schemes, and has undertaken 13,500 audits. From this month, the SQC scheme will move to a product certification model meaning that audits will be carried out over 12 rather than 10 months to improve capacity.

A farmer view

As a farmer who produces cereals, beef and potatoes, Dave Bell is SQC, QMS and LEAF assured; he says:

“It’s great to consolidate these audits, there’s so much overlap in information that’s required. The efficiencies of multiple audits being done by one auditor during one visit, saves time for the farmer, the auditor and the certification body itself.”

Mr Bell adds that, if you are well prepared, it's possible to get three audits done, and pass them, in one morning, as he was able to do last year.

“The reason that we farmers don't like audits, is that we don't like doing the paperwork! But we must just get on with it, it's such a necessity. As farmers, food safety, traceability and crop safety certification are vital, and these schemes have allowed us to forget about food scares; also, to know that to supply the best market opportunities, assurance is fundamental and all those I sell to require me to have assurance and certification.”

FIA has seven dedicated full-time field-based employees, unlike some other bodies that work only with sub-contractors, and all auditors will rotate every three years as standard. FIA's aim is to support, develop and build on Scotland's key credentials of truly sustainable food production, that is climate-friendly, not only through an audit, but all year round, which has led to employing dedicated Scottish Area Managers to support auditors and members. Recent training has also included RSABI's Mental Health First Aid.

A collective approach for greater market influence

FIA's General Manager, Stephen Sanderson, a former dairy farmer with a depth of experience in other certification schemes, explains the cross-scheme process:

“The auditor still needs to do a separate report for each of the assurance schemes, which can take time, and the more complex the farm, and the paperwork, multiple audits could be a full day or extend into two, but that suits most farmers better than it being a two-hour audit one day, three hours another and another six months later. Our vision and what we are working hard on is to simplify it as much as possible and to use technology to its best advantage to do this, as well as providing an easy way for growers to demonstrate their environmental credentials so they can leverage this.”

In line with this, he sees a mindset shift associated with the younger generation being involved with farm businesses.

“The younger generation see the use of data as an opportunity, as part of progressing their farms and using technology to drive more efficiency; we need to do everything we can to harness this in the auditing process and to have 365-day information literally in the palm of our hands.”

Stephen is working on some progressive propositions, including creating a central database of farmers' information, to which FIA can grant authorised access to each member and approved organisations for verification or certification purposes and creating mechanisms for validating environmental activity. This would allow for more outcome-based certification, where payments are linked to what farmers are doing to drive efficiency, reduce emissions or sequester carbon, rather than undertaking prescriptive actions to meet certain criteria:

“If you're managing your business in an efficient manner, you gain the benefits of the efficiency and the marketing opportunities that result from embracing those standards. But second to that, you're improving your carbon footprint and maximising your carbon credit.

There are potentially lucrative market opportunities from the outcome-based approach for businesses like these.”

This is the advantage of working collaboratively with organisations as there is benefit in the collective both practically and in terms of access to markets, he says:

“Together, we can be very competitive to the marketplace, representing farmers as a collective, rather than them being singled out as individuals.”

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Editors' notes:

SQC

FIA

LEAF Marque: The principles of Integrated Farm Management (IFM) underpin the requirements of LEAF Marque certification, as set out in the LEAF Marque Standard. IFM is a whole farm business approach that delivers more sustainable farming. Modern technology and traditional methods are used with the goal of delivering a prosperous farming that enriches the environment and engages local communities.

A farm business managed to IFM principles will demonstrate site-specific and continuous improvement across the whole farm including: Organisation and Planning, Soil Management and Fertility, Crop Health and Protection, Pollution Control and By-Product Management, Animal Husbandry, Energy Efficiency, Water Management, Landscape and Nature Conservation and Community Engagement.