

Biofertiliser Certification Scheme Operators' Forum

Minutes for the meeting on Wednesday 2nd October 2024

Attendees

Jane Hall (JH)	Chair
Georgia Phetmanh (GP)	REAL BCS
Oliver Dunn (OD)	REAL BCS
Megan Muller-Girard (MMG)	REAL Research Hub
Duncan Andrew Craig (DAC)	REAL BCS
Jo Chapman (JC)	BCS Operators' Representative
Tom Brown (TB)	BCS Operators' Representative
Rebecca Taylor (RT)	Iona Management Services
Iain Elliott (IE)	Grissan
Angela Cronje (AC)	Earnside Energy and Willen Biogas
Tom Megginson (TM)	GWE Biogas
Alison Inglis (AI)	ch4mail.com
Leonardo Narvaez (LN)	SUEZ

Acronyms

BCS: Biofertiliser Certification Scheme	PC&S: Physical Contaminants and Stones
REAL: Renewable Energy Assurance Ltd.	Defra: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
RH: Research Hub	WRAP: Waste and Resources Action Programme
EoW: End of Waste	RBP: Residual Biogas Potential
CIWM: Chartered Institution of Wastes Management	NRM: Natural Resource Management Laboratories
EA: Environment Agency	CCS: Compost Certification Scheme
RF: Resource Framework	ACL: Accreditation and Certification Ltd.
AD: Anaerobic Digestion	e. coli: Escherichia coli
QP: Quality Protocol	SF: Separated Fibre
TAC: Technical Advisory Committee	SL: Separated Liquor
CB: Certification Body	

ABPR: Animal By-Products Regulation?

ORG: Organics Recycling Group

NIEA: Northern Ireland Environment Agency

PAS: Publicly Available Specification

NRW: Natural Resources Wales

RH: Research Hub

MDD: Manure-Derived Digestate

QMS: Quality Management System

Housekeeping

REAL was pleased to welcome two new BCS forum attendees – AI and LN.

The minutes from the previous forum were accepted without objection.

Updates on the BCS

Updates on previous meeting actions

End of Waste Webinar Actions

- JH to discuss specific end-of-waste (EoW) webinar idea with Chartered Institute of Waste Management (CIWM) focusing on feedstocks (and speak to the environment Agency (EA); possibly Richard Fairweather, Redwynn Sterry, or Kathy Nicholls)
- JH to request speakers to include the new Resources Frameworks in draft CIWM webinar agenda

JH and CIWM happy to host a webinar but only if it would be of interest. Forum attendees agreed it would be useful—especially a session on what the new RFs will mean for on-farm Anaerobic Digestate (AD)—but decided to park it until the new Resource Frameworks (RF) are finalised and published.

- REAL to consider and potentially discuss with REA whether there's scope for REAL-led or joint Quality Protocol (QP) revision webinars after the publication of new RFs, to explain changes to operators etc., keeping in mind it would be useful to prepare for and hold it shortly after Resource Framework (RF) publication

Waiting to action until RFs are finalised.

Sharp Failure Actions

- Operators to share specific information with REAL about sharps failures which they consider questionable

REAL received additional information from one operator regarding sharps failures and are currently looking into the test result stats to gather quantitative data on the sharps failure rate. No additional cases brought to REAL's attention by scheme participants between now and previous forum.

- REAL to further investigate sharps issue on receipt of information from operators

BCS analysed the data and found a small increase in the sharps failure rates in 2023 compared to 2021-2022. The labs suggested this could be due to improvement in technicians' performance but acknowledge the method is subjective and want there to be greater specificity.

- REAL to come back to operators on a process for challenging results and an update on revising methods

BCS sought the Technical Advisory Committee's (TAC) views and discussed a possible appeals process with the Certification Bodies (CB) and Labs. The labs are not keen to introduce an appeals process, and the CBs are not aware any other certification schemes that do so. BCS is setting up an initiative to review and revise test methods in the coming months, focusing first on the Physical Contaminants & Stones (PC&S) method. It is likely that the sharps definition will be updated.

Industry Capacity Actions

- Operators to raise issues in other forums re Defra potentially not being aware of current or future AD capacity for recycling food waste and fulfilling requirements of new regulations
- REAL to liaise with REA Organics on the issue of AD capacity for recycling food waste
WRAP distributed a questionnaire on this subject. DC contacted WRAP to discuss and will update in future if he's able to get an indication of the results

Lab-Related Actions

- REAL to consider how to address issues raised by operators in relation to one of the BCS Approved labs and discuss internally what actions can be taken in the meantime
Regarding the error in Residual Biogas Potential (RBP) testing, the Schemes discussed this with the lab. Regarding findings from independent auditor, the Schemes are waiting on findings to determine if further actions need to be taken. The issue of invalid e. coli results is addressed below.
- REAL to consider a potential fast track process introduced by the labs for samples sent in the event of failure (with operators paying a premium)
NRM and Eurofins offer fast tracking on request for an added fee but can never guarantee a quicker turnaround. If fast-track cannot be done, the added fee will not be applied.
- GP to review notes from CCS forum/TAC around producers sending multiple samples for the same test to confirm if the same approach would be allowed for AD operators, then confirm to DC and KF
Labs can accommodate individual requests for testing multiple samples but do not support a scheme-wide approach to offer this as a routine service
- GP to look back at previous correspondence between the lab, AC, and the CB around RBP non-response and look to streamline the approach with similar issues brought to REAL's attention
Action ongoing – ACL reviewing RBP guidance
- REAL to discuss issues with ACL raised by operators around scheduling audits & compliance notices
ACL agreed to bring audit scheduling forward to contact sites five months before certificate expiry in line with other CBs. Regarding late compliance notices, ACL is introducing changes to the audit report review process in light of this feedback.

Research Hub-Related Actions

- Operators to respond to Hub proposal feedback survey by 3pm today (previous forum)
Complete
- Operators to get in touch with Meg if interested in volunteering for the Hub webinars for unis
No volunteers yet but if interested, please still get in touch

Any questions on the summary paper?

JC queried whether BCS could elaborate on a data request made for RBP data. GP explained not at this stage but potentially if the report the data is used for is made public

JC queried whether the recent BCS site visit to a sewage sludge treatment plant was indicative of a change in thinking/strategy around the schemes. DC explained this was for an REA member meeting he presented at, and the type of site was merely coincidental.

E.coli investigation conclusion

In May, an approved lab notified that a number of passing E. Coli results were now invalid due to results being potentially underreported. 11 AD processes were impacted by invalid E. coli tests. The schemes carried out an investigation and conducted a risk assessment. This risk assessment found that the likelihood of digestate containing E. coli above the PAS limits is very low. The schemes are not concerned by the outcome of this assessment and have shared the outcomes with the regulators and will share them with the TAC next month.

This experience has served to strengthen the robustness of the schemes with the development of further safeguards and processes to avoid similar issues in future. The Schemes are now reviewing the Lab T&Cs and Scheme rules to prevent this from recurring and if so, to respond in a more streamlined way.

AC noted she received an email from DR informing her that NRM was underreporting e. Coli which she found confusing as the testing issue only applied to Separated Fibre (SF) and compost and AC's sites only produce Separated Liquor (SL). The email came through ABPR rather than PAS testing suite. TB also received this email.

Update on the Resource Framework

RF Publication Timeline

In early June, REAL received formalised RF drafts and submitted a consultation response with operator input in mid-August. The final interim framework was meant to be shared in September, but this did not occur, so we are now awaiting an updated timeline from the EA. When the publication date is shared, REAL can begin organising a webinar on what the changes will mean for the Schemes and participants.

Likely Changes (including waste codes)

The Environment Agency (EA) has indicated the following re the contents of the final RFs: designated markets will be returned with added language to allow digestate fibre to go to horticulture markets. Several waste codes are reported to be returned to the RF, subject to final confirmation, (e.g., dairy sludges, glycerol) and the only waste codes that will stay out is treated wood, again, subject to final confirmation in the published RF.

Attendees expressed confusion and concern about the removal of 17 (or 07) and 19 waste codes (e.g., glycerol, waste from aerobic treatment and anaerobic treatment), noting the EA may not understand the operational impact of removing waste codes. Attendees agreed they would like to contribute to future consultations to provide an industry perspective and expressed general frustration about the lack of clarity in the EA's timelines or rationale for various decisions throughout the revision process.

Transition Periods

The AD/Compost RFs will be published alongside an RPS which will outline the allowed two-year transition for operators to achieve compliance with the reduced plastic limits (8% of the PAS limit).

The EA does not intend to have transition period for any changes besides the reduced plastic limits. If operators struggle to operate following the removal of certain waste codes or other changes, they should contact their local EA rep to have a site-specific discussion. REAL is seeking clarity from the EA about what that will mean in practice.

Adoption among devolved regulators

JH noted that the RFs will only legally apply in England. If NIEA or NRW adopt the frameworks, they'll be leaving it to operators to prove they meet EoW. NRW hasn't published EoW info on their website and no one in post to check EoW, which creates a problem for adopting a circular economy in Wales.

DC shared that NRW have indicated they are waiting to see the final RFs before confirming if they will adopt them but likely will at some point.

Manure-derived digestate (MDD)

AC shared that following the EA's withdrawal of RPS 252 without implementing an alternative solution, any AD plant producing MDD is currently in an unclear legal position in terms of its waste/non-waste status. Many plants have continued operating as normal and the EA isn't prosecuting instances of spreading Manure Derived Digestate (MDD) without a valid deployment. JH noted that the Waste Framework Directive, includes provisions for excluding MDD from permitting requirements.

JC shared that, at the outset of the QP revision process, the EA committed to add a provision for MDD, and she hopes this will come in the second phase of the RF, noting that Scotland has been quite clear on their position that operators which produce MDD can continue with 'business as usual'. DC noted the Schemes will be working on this issue next year (2025).

Updating scheme rules alongside the RF

REAL will update the scheme rules as soon as the RF is finalised, making changes to reflect the updated terminology and technical changes.

Feedback from the last Technical Advisory Committee

JC shared the following key updates from the previous TAC:

- The last TAC took place in person, which was refreshing. The setup—satellite offices in London and SEPA, linked by a chair who joined virtually—worked well
- All three issues from the previous forum were raised and discussed in a slightly different way (with slides and supporting info) after learning points about the difficulty of raising quite technical points – this format worked much better, and the discussion was very constructive
- The outcomes of the TAC regarding the three operator issues were as follows:
 - Sharps – REAL are collecting data regarding sharps failures and considering next steps internally
 - RBP issue – the lab has conducted a review of the issue and the lab rep, Sarah Pitchard was willing to look into issues take responsibility for mistakes and learn from them.
 - CBS being late – this has been addressed
- Operators should raise any lab-related issues with the labs directly as there is a formal, auditable process for dealing with complaints
- JC noted that issues raised at the forum are taken seriously at the TAC and encouraged Scheme participants to continue bringing issues to the forum. AC shared that the fora are invaluable and hoped they would always continue to ensure operators can have a channel to the TAC

Policy Updates

Digestate in Horticulture

RFs will allow the use of digestate in horticulture, potentially to address calls for a peat alternative, in advance of expected peat bans. AC noted that some digestate already goes to horticulture, so the sector already has a foot in the door. Further, a few sites processing manure want to supply to horticulture (no longer only agriculture), underscoring the complications of not having an EoW route for MDD. JC suggested submitting a Research Hub proposal to explore digestate in horticultural uses.

Simpler recycling (England)

Defra preparing to roll out Simpler Recycling to households by March 1st 2026, including mandatory separate collections of food waste and to businesses by March 1st 2025, although the Schemes Policy Team are looking to reach out to Defra to discuss shortening this timeframe. It's still unclear when charities, religious groups, etc. will need to comply.

Research Hub Updates

Project Selection Process

The annual project selection process includes (1) an annual Call for Proposals, (2) Participant Feedback Survey (3) Phase 1 evaluation of proposals – shortlisting, (4) Phase 2 evaluation of proposals – selection.

New projects selected in 2024 are expected to be announced soon. The next call for proposals will begin again in January, and Scheme participants are encouraged to submit ideas.

Project Updates

The Plastic Method Assessment Report, which explores the current method of testing for plastics under CCS/BCS as well as alternative methods (incl. methods to test for microplastics), is due to be published in the next week or so.

The Risk Assessment Project began with a review of the hazard analysis (currently underway) as the precursor to this Risk Assessment. The Hub intends to invite tenders for the risk assessment soon and encourages all to share the invitation widely when it's published.

Other Developments (for Feedback)

Since the previous forum, where the Hub announced the publication of a carbon accounting methodology for composters and AD operators, the Hub is now considering whether and how to develop the project report into a user-friendly calculator tool.

The Hub is also considering several developments to the research library, including making Research Hub reports available on the platform and giving all Scheme Participants Accounts

Participants were reminded to provide feedback on these potential developments and the Research Hub more generally through the annual [Research Hub survey closing 31st October](#).

AC suggested it would be useful to have Organics Recycling Group (ORG) reports available on the Research Library as well as a summary of the different projects, money spent on each and the outcomes so that operators have a more tangible understanding of the work the Research Hub is doing and how it benefits them.

Issues raised with BCS Operators' Representative

No further questions were raised

An opportunity to discuss other issues raised by operators

Waste Tracking Requirements

AC raised the REA member article on waste tracking as the new requirements will affect everyone involved with waste. JH shared her view that the changes are likely to be delayed from the planned rollout date of 1st April, noting there was lots of pushback from larger companies and limited communication channels between industry and Defra.

The current version of the system which was recently tested didn't allow for integrations with existing systems, which companies are likely to have invested heavily in. Instead, the test panel were required to complete a single waste transfer note per movement of waste which took approximately 10 minutes.

This is unlikely to be workable for larger companies with a significant number of waste movements unless integrations are developed, which is now unlikely to be achievable before March 2025.

Internal Audit Training Requirements (PAS 100 vs PAS 110)

AC noted that PAS 100 requires training qualifications for internal audits, while PAS 110 does not. AC needed to conduct internal audits for a few CCS sites and therefore had to take a training course to be compliant, despite her expertise in PAS 100 (seemed a bit of a formality). AC flagged this to note for potential future PAS revisions – why is this requirement included in one and not the other? JC underscored this, noting she was also required to have added training to conduct internal audits, despite having the expertise and knowledge of the schemes.

AC suggested this could be addressed by having REAL run an internal auditing course

Further Processing to Manage Digestate volumes with limited storage

Finally, JC noted that several operators looking at alternative ways to manage digestate (e.g., given increasing rain levels, they need it to take up less space in a lagoon). For instance, some operators are looking into reverse osmosis (RO) and evaporators for SL to recover water (in addition to drying), but this currently does not fall under certification as it comes after separation so is considered ‘further processing.’ JC felt this is a massive barrier to everyone progressing, adding that many operators doing climate change risk assessments say there’s a need to address this. JC suggested this could be for the EoW webinar, noting she’d discussed it with REA and welcomed others’ experiences.

JH agreed, noting she has operators looking at contingency plans. TM notes his site ran an RO process which he was able to get PAS certified for, but no longer runs that process due to odour issues and cost.

JH noted that operators may need a permit variation if employing RO as it is a treatment operation and connected to permitted activities.

JC shared that all 3 CBs definitively stated they would not certify processes running RO, noting that the CBs are simply working with the standards they have and doing their best to be consistent.

AOBs

- The Schemes will be trialling a briefer ‘executive summary’ format for minutes, with the plan to record and auto-transcribe meeting for archival/verification purposes. Full transcript-style minutes may therefore be available to attendees on request.
- Although there are no current plans to introduce Independent Sampling into scheme rules, the schemes are considering a small-scale independent sampling trial. The aim of the trial would be to produce a limited cost/benefit analysis to inform the potential for future implementation.
- The CCS/BCS blogs continue! The aim is to post spotlights/case studies of scheme participants on specific topics of interest. Please email Ollie to contribute to the next blog on the topic “How AD contributes to environmental protection” or to share other topic ideas for future blogs.
- Participants were reminded to complete the annual BCS Participant Survey by 31st October to help BCS continue to improve the Scheme(s)
- Upcoming webinars – Contact oliver@realschemes.org.uk to attend
 - Digestate sampling: October 31st
 - Digestate Testing: November 1st
- AC requested that any upcoming face-to-face forum be held in Preston or Manchester
- JH suggested that an in-person meeting be held when the RF is published to discuss the changes and their impacts on the Schemes and Operators

Actions

1. OD to feed operators' disagreements regarding sharp failures into the BCS Physical Contaminants & Stones test method review
2. JH to return to EoW webinar discussions with CIWM after the publication of the RFs
3. REAL to further consider holding separate webinar for manure-based digestate producers / on-farm AD producers, in conjunction with CIWM
4. AC to send e-mails from Sci-Tech related to the E. coli test issue to GP for further investigation.
5. REAL to further consider sharing final draft ADRF or list of acceptable waste inputs with forum attendees to seek feedback on any inputs which have been removed from the QP and the implications of this, to share with the EA
6. MMG to further consider liaising with REA on sharing publications on their website in the Hub's Research Library
7. Operators to share any feedback with MMG on the Research Library usability and experience
8. Operators to fill out annual Research Hub participant survey.
9. MMG to consider the production of a newsletter or pamphlet covering the work of the Hub, with a focus on outcomes of projects, to inform operators what they've funded to date.
10. MMG to provide additional information about university presentation/webinar idea and seek volunteers from operators for the 2025 webinars.
11. REAL to further consider feedback from operators around the discrepancies across CCS and BCS in terms of requirements for training around internal auditing, and the suggestion for REAL or REA to develop a training course on internal auditing for the schemes
12. Operators to message AC about experience with internal QMS auditing for a composting site in the Northeast and whether they would be willing and able to provide this service.
13. Operators to share information with OD about practical implications of having a third party visit the site to take an independent compost sample for PAS100 testing.
14. Operators to email OD if they're potentially interested in being a blog post contributor on the topic of 'How AD contributes to environmental protection'
15. REAL to consider holding a face-to-face forum in Manchester or Preston, which would include an operator discussion on RF changes (once published) and their implementation into scheme operation.