

FARMING WITH NATURE

How Nestlé's Regenerative Milk Plan
is supporting family farms, soils,
water and nature across Cumbria,
Ayrshire and Wigtownshire



MEMBERS

Nestlé UK & Ireland,
in partnership with First Milk



Dalston, Cumbria & Girvan, Ayrshire,
and Stranraer, Wigtownshire

THE STORY IN BRIEF

Economic security and household stability

A partnership with First Milk running since 2003 gives farming families across all three areas a long-term route to market and, since 2021, a sustainable payment on top of the milk price. Because First Milk is a co-operative owned by around 700 British family farms, the value it creates flows back to its farmer members.

Community resilience

The Young Dairy Leaders programme, launched in Cumbria in 2026, is building the skills and confidence of the farmers who will run these businesses next.

Environmental impact

Soil carbon on independently resampled farms rising by an average of more than 8 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent per hectare every year, nearly nine in ten hectares under rotational grazing across 63 farms, and more than 7,100 trees planted.

WHERE IT STARTED

For generations, dairy farming has been the backbone of the rural economy in Cumbria, Ayrshire and Wigtownshire, and family farms remain at the heart of the communities around Dalston (near Carlisle), Girvan (on the South Ayrshire coast) and Stranraer. Many of these families have looked after the same land for decades, and some are the third generation to supply Nestlé. Today they are being asked to do more; to run profitable businesses while customers, government and the public expect farming to deliver more for climate, water and nature.

Since 2003, Nestlé has sourced milk from farming families within 50 miles of its factories in Dalston and Girvan, through First Milk, the dairy co-operative owned by around 700 British family farms. Farmers here know the pressure of volatility first-hand: the constant calculation of whether to intensify, diversify, or leave dairy altogether. Nestlé and First Milk asked; could a long-term supply relationship give farmers the confidence, and the tools, to take the risk of trying new ways of farming that deliver wider outcomes across carbon, water and nature?

WHAT THEY DID

Farm by farm, farmers were supported to extend rotational grazing, keep living roots in the ground for more of the year, cut back ploughing, plant trees and manage hedgerows for wildlife. Since 2021, farmers supplying Nestlé through the Milk Plan have received a sustainability payment on top of the milk price for making those changes.

Regenerative practices can sometimes challenge the accepted norms of farmers, suppliers, advisers and bank managers operating in the sector. However, in this case, the encouragement came from both the farmers' own co-operative and from their long-term buyer. Farmers who might not have taken the risk alone were willing to take it together.

In 2021 Nestlé and First Milk launched a pioneering soil carbon measurement project with Agricarbon, physically testing soil across participating farms rather than relying on modelled estimates. The partnership's work was recognised with the Collaboration and Partnership Award at the Food Manufacture Excellence Awards 2024. In 2026 the partners went further again, launching Young Dairy Leaders in Cumbria to build the business skills and resilience of the next generation of dairy farmers.

“Regenerative farming can only scale if we can measure it. Independent soil testing and farm-level data show us what's really changing in the ground, and that's what turns ambition into evidence.”

Sobia Naheed

Responsible Sourcing Manager
and Project Manager for the Milk
Plan, Nestlé UK & Ireland



Extended
rotational grazing



Reduced
ploughing



Planting trees and
managing hedgerows

THE DIFFERENCE IT'S MADE



+8 TONNES

ON CUMBRIAN, AYRSHIRE AND WIGTOWNSHIRE FARMS WHERE SOILS HAVE BEEN INDEPENDENTLY RESAMPLED, SOIL CARBON HAS RISEN BY AN AVERAGE OF MORE THAN 8 TONNES OF CO₂ EQUIVALENT PER HECTARE EVERY YEAR



7,100

TREES PLANTED ACROSS ALL FARMS TO DATE



-17%

FALL IN NESTLÉ'S MILK SUPPLY CHAIN EMISSIONS BETWEEN 2018 AND 2024



9 OUT OF 10

HECTARES UNDER ROTATIONAL GRAZING ACROSS ALL 63 NESTLÉ-SUPPLYING FARMS

The evidence is now coming out of the ground itself. On

Cumbrian, Ayrshire and Wigtownshire farms where soils have been independently resampled, soil carbon has risen by an average of more than 8 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent per hectare every year. Across all 63 Nestlé-supplying farms, nearly nine in ten hectares are now under rotational grazing, ahead of comparable farms, and watercourses are better protected. More than 7,100 trees have been planted across the farms to date and emissions from Nestlé's milk supply chain fell by 17% between 2018 and 2024.

While a long-term buyer and a stable price relationship help make this possible, these outcomes were earned through the hard work of farmers. The same relationship is helping to keep family farms in business and give the next generation a reason to build a career in dairy. Family resilience adds up to community resilience.

Lee Truelove, First Milk's Director of Regenerative Farming and Agriculture, has described the Young Dairy Leaders programme as building the community, confidence and competence the next generation of regenerative farmers will need. Mike Warmington, Regeneration Lead at Nestlé UK & Ireland, makes the commercial case in the same breath: long-term resilience in the supply chain means resilient farm businesses, not only regenerative practice.

The connection runs all the way to the supermarket shelf. Milk from Ayrshire goes into chocolate made in Yorkshire; milk from Cumbria into coffee produced a few miles from the farms that supply it. As Nestlé UK & Ireland's Head of Sustainability, Dr Emma Keller, puts it, the ambition is to show "how their morning coffee or sweet treat can support the future of British farming."

COULD THIS WORK IN YOUR AREA?

The Nestlé and First Milk experience carries lessons for the wider food and farming sector: farmers can go further for climate, water and nature when brands, processors and long-term partners back them with lasting commercial relationships, and when farmers can measure, and prove, the results of the changes they make.

There is a warning alongside the lesson. First Milk uses the term “ghost acres” for what happens when Britain does not support transparent, sustainable domestic supply chains. The production does not

disappear; it moves overseas, onto land we cannot see and to standards we do not set. Food security and environmental ambition are the same conversation.

This model could be replicated wherever a food or drink manufacturer sources from UK farms: rewarding measured outcomes through supply relationships. Pairing commercial commitment with independent measurement builds a credible, evidence-based case for progress, and Government can help this approach reach many more farms across the UK.

HOW GOVERNMENT CAN HELP

- 1 Move farm support from paying for actions to paying for outcomes, rewarding measured improvements in soil organic matter and biodiversity rather than the interventions themselves.
- 2 Design farm support schemes in England and Scotland to complement, not compete with, private supply chain investment in regenerative agriculture.
- 3 Give farmers and supply chain partners long-term policy certainty, including on water quality and nutrient management, so they can plan and invest with confidence.
- 4 Support robust, affordable ways to measure outcomes for soil, carbon, water, animals and people, so that farmers and businesses can make credible, comparable commitments and be rewarded for real progress.

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