



Entrant company name: **UKCEH**

Entry title: **First UK Rice Trials**

Category: **STEM Campaign**

Trials to grow rice in the UK for the first time saw scientists from the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology (UKCEH) partner with farmers in the Cambridgeshire Fens, to explore ways to tackle climate change, food security and nature recovery. Nine rice varieties, including risotto (Arborio), basmati (Dellmati) and sushi (Koshihikari) were harvested in October 2025.

The longer-term aim of the research is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from peatlands that have been degraded through agricultural use.

Budget

Delivered by UKCEH's Communications & Engagement team, our scientists and Oxwillow farmers. Costs: travel only.

Research

The Communications & Engagement Strategy 2025 prioritised a multi-channel approach across owned, earned and shared, channels. Video production was brought in-house for the first time to make visual storytelling more affordable. This followed a review of social channels and feedback from journalists, who highlighted our science can be difficult to visualise for mainstream audiences.

Objectives, Strategy and Innovation

Objective 1: Translate innovative climate science into accessible public understanding, demonstrating its relevance to farming and food security (Secure at least one Tier One national broadcast feature e.g. BBC TV/radio and 20+ pieces of earned media coverage across national, consumer and trade, deliver integrated storytelling across earned, owned and shared channels)

- Focus on the rice trials element of the wider research project as a hook across earned, shared and owned channels.
- Use novelty of rice being grown in the UK for the first time to broaden engagement beyond science and academic audiences.

Objective 2: Strengthen UKCEH's partnerships, policy and sector engagement (aiming for engagement with Defra, MPs, businesses, NGOs)

- Raise the profile and visibility of UKCEH
- Demonstrate how independent science can provide practical solutions for food security and future farming livelihoods.
- Support UKCEH's inaugural Trustees' Dinner and its first steps into fundraising and development

Objective 3: Demonstrate a replicable, proactive and integrated communications model.

- Deliver a fully integrated, in-house campaign, aligning media, stakeholder engagement and scientific milestones.
- Shift UKCEH's traditional 'science communications' approach away from reactive "research paper = press release" towards proactive audience-first storytelling.
- Support soft launch of UKCEH's new brand.

Creative Storytelling

A narrative was developed combining scientific innovation with human experience to make UKCEH science relatable. Recognising the visual potential of the UK's first homegrown rice crop, we produced a suite of assets, including video footage filmed inside the Oxfordshire grow dome and at the paddy fields trial site.

The story was told through the voices of both scientists and the husband and wife farmers hosting the trials. Their reflections on doing this "for our children and the legacy of the farm" added authenticity.

A media pitch centred on the visual potential of the trials, including ideas such as cooking rice beside the paddy fields. However, protecting scientific credibility and the reputation of our farming partners was key.

The farmers were conscious they might be ‘laughed at’ by peers, while scientists wanted media to focus on the wider research programme. We ensured the narrative remained accurate: this was a scientific trial, the rice was not yet edible, and farmers were not replacing their crops.

Earned Media Strategy

A two-pronged approach: 1. We waited until the rice had fully grown to ensure the visuals were at their strongest; 2. second phase planned for ‘harvesting’ the rice.

Leveraging an existing relationship with BBC Science journalist Georgina Raynard, we pitched the story as an exclusive. This secured authoritative, science led coverage, and a planned coordinated rollout across BBC Online, BBC Radio 4, BBC Breakfast and BBC News throughout the day.

All UKCEH assets were prepared in advance and released when the BBC story broke, amplifying across mainstream media.

Building on an existing relationship with The One Show, we negotiated coverage for the ‘harvest’ that combined science with a culinary moment. UKCEH team also captured additional video used in the final broadcast. Scheduled broadcast held to coincide with COP30 in Brazil, further linking the story to the global climate agenda.

To extend the story internationally, we partnered with global news agency, AFP. This involved the UKCEH team filming the harvested rice at our labs in Oxfordshire in addition to working directly with AFP at the field trial site.

The ‘harvest’ coverage coincided with UKCEH’s inaugural Trustees’ Dinner held at The Royal Institution, attended by 70 stakeholders from government, businesses and NGOs, where UKCEH’s new brand was soft launched. Each table represented a UKCEH field site with The Fens table featuring rice from the trials.

Measurement, Evaluation and Impact Highlights

- 251 pieces of media coverage (see supporting evidence). Total impressions provided by Agility: 306,679,051
- BBC News shared TikTok video (14.5m+ followers, 40k+ likes, 500 comments)
- Campaign video assets achieved 3,100+ views, while initial social posts published alongside broadcast coverage generated 20k views in the first 24 hours. Follow-up posts secured a further 19k+ views
- Queen of Vitality - influencer with 71.6k Instagram followers created a reel and Deborah Meaden amplified our posts

- Our social content was shared by key stakeholders including UK Research & Innovation, Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council, Natural Environment Research Council
- Seed World Europe shared post on LinkedIn (leading platform for the European seed industry)
- Engagement with policymakers at Department for Environment & Rural Affairs with a visit to the field trial site
- Visit request / planned for Charlotte Cane MP for Ely
- Speaker invite for lead scientist at Oxford Farming Conference (high profile, very competitive)
- Site visit request from Associated British Foods
- Site visit request from Editor of Sainsbury's Food Magazine via our Chair
- Enquiries and technical input from academic institutions regarding year-two trials
- Partnership secured with Farmers Weekly (FW) for New Scientist Live 2026, featuring STEM in farming with activation across FW TikTok, Insta and show

Media coverage has continued into 2026, with the rice trials cited as a positive example of science helping address climate change, food security and the future of farming.