

Teagasc Opening Statement on Organic Farming to the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture Food and the Marine - June 22 2021

Chairman, we would like to thank you and the Committee for the opportunity to present before you this afternoon.

Background

The Teagasc vision for organic farming is driven by an increasing market for organic food and by EU and national policy. At EU level, The Farm to Fork Strategy is at the heart of the European Green Deal, that aims to make food systems sustainable, equitable, and healthy. Organic farming has a key role to play in the delivery of this vision. The target of 25% of all EU land to be farmed organically by 2030 is ambitious and sets out a ‘horizon point’ for Ireland.

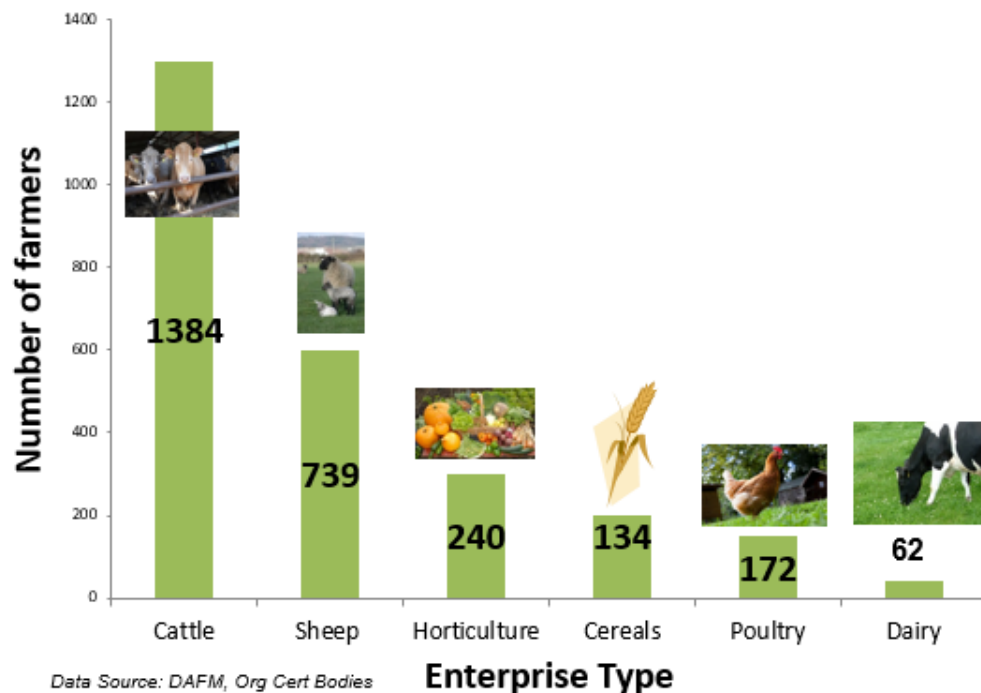
Nationally, the Organic Review and Strategy 2019-2025 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fc7c8-organic-farming/>) is the primary policy document for the Irish organics sector. Teagasc had a strong role in the development of the strategy (our colleague Dan Clavin was a member of the Strategy Committee) along with other stakeholders. Teagasc is responsible for implementing many of the strategic actions.

Characteristics of the Irish Organic Sector

Approximately 2% of utilisable agricultural area is under organic production in Ireland.

- The Irish challenge: Current Organic area 2020 = 74,000Ha
- Target Organic area 2030 = 350,000Ha or about 9.5% of UAA
- 70% of organic farmers are involved in organic beef production.

PROFILE OF IRISH ORGANIC PRODUCTION 2019



Supports for Organic Farmers

DAFM Organic Support Schemes

1. Organic Farming Scheme. The Scheme is closed at present and there have been 317 applicants. The scheme is expected to increase the number of farmers involved by 20%. Under the Scheme farmers yearly payments of up to €220/ha during the conversion period and up to €170/ha once full organic status is achieved.
2. Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme II (TAMS II): Organic Capital Investment Scheme
3. Organic Processing Investment Grant Scheme

Organic bodies

The sector is well represented by a number of organisations:

- Irish Organic Association
- Organic Trust
- Global Trust aquaculture
- National Organic Training SkillNet

Teagasc Supports for Organic Producers

Teagasc supports for organic producers comprises four main components:

1. Technical Publications and On-line Information
2. Advisory Services
3. Education Services
4. Research Services

Technical Publications and On-line Information

Through its Farm Management and Rural Development Department, Teagasc provides advice to potential and existing organic farmers. This service includes face-to-face delivery and virtual and digital platforms accessible on the Teagasc Organics website (<https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/>). This website provides a large range of information and publications: such as:

- Factsheets on organic beef, sheep, dairy, cereals, horticulture and poultry production
- Technical queries - Ask an Organic Question: <http://interactive.teagasc.ie/Open/OrganicsQuestion>
- Is Organics an Option? <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/is-organics-an-option/>
- Steps to Organic Conversion <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/steps-to-organic-conversion>
- Guidelines for Successful Organic Beef Production
- A Helpline Email for organic queries organicqueries@teagasc.ie is currently being established.
- The Teagasc organics website also includes Teagasc published research along with other international organics research articles <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/research/>.

Teagasc Advisory Services for Organic Farming

Our advisory services comprise several elements:

- 2 full time organic specialists. Teagasc plan in the near future to increase this to 3 full-time specialists.
- 15 organic advisors located within Teagasc's regional advisory office network
- A network of Organics Discussion Groups
 - 5 advisors with Organic KT discussion groups (beef)
 - 1 organic dairy discussion group with 22 members.
- An Organic Demonstration Farm programme in conjunction with DAFM. This programme has been suspended during COVID but is expected to resume shortly.
- The Teagasc SignPost Farms Programme is building a network of farms which will act as sustainability demonstration farms and sites for the measurement of carbon sequestration. It is intended to have up to 5 organic farms within this network.

Teagasc Organic Education Services

- Accredited 25 hour Organic Farming Principles course (Farmers are encouraged to register their interest online: <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/training/>. The course scheduled to commence in early September at a cost of €220.
- An organic module – 'Organic Farming Principles' has been devised for the in Certificate in Agriculture Course which will be delivered at Teagasc Colleges and Regional Education Centres.
- Teagasc and NUI Galway are partnering in a new B. Sc. Agriculture degree with its first intake of students in autumn 2021. There is strong interest in the CAO applications for the degree, which will have a strong focus on all aspects of sustainability, with a specific focus on organic farming.

Teagasc Research Support for Organic and Agro-ecological Farming Systems

Biophysical Research: In general, the broad range of Teagasc Knowledge Transfer and Research in relation to general farming advice is consistent with many facets of organic farming. In recent years, research and advice on grassland management in particular, is converging towards the adoption of many agro-ecological approaches such as the research currently being undertaken on:

Multi-species Sward (MSS):

- Athenry: evaluation of incorporating white clover into sheep grazed swards at two fertiliser nitrogen and stocking rate levels on the productivity of pasture based lamb production systems
- Johnstown Castle: adaptation potential of multi-species agronomic grassland mixtures for the effects of extreme climate events.
- Grange: conservation efficiency and nutritive value value of silages made from grass, red clover and multi species swards compared to grass monocultures
- Moorepark: the assessment of MSS in commercial dairy farming systems.

Low input and Zero N:

- Solohead: developing a blueprint for pasture-based dairy production with low or no chemical nitrogen input

Soil Health and Regenerative Agriculture:

- Understanding how the function of micro-organisms or the soil microbiome within soils and plants is affected by agronomic practices in combination with soil, environmental and climatic factors.

Current Socio-Economic Research: Teagasc is partnering on a Horizon 2020 project led by INRAE in France called “LIFT: Low-Input Farming and Territorial approaches” <https://www.lift-h2020.eu/>. While the overall project examines agro-ecological approaches, the Irish research is focused on organics and in the following areas:

- Developing a typology of the intensity of European farms based on the EU Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN)
- Assessing the impact of agro-ecological transition on work practices and working conditions: a case study of Irish beef farmers converting to organic production
- Assessing the benefits of going beyond FADN data to include richer environmental data for comparative analyses of French, Irish and Austrian farming efficiency
- Taking an Innovation System approach to assessing the barriers to dairy conversion to organics
- Qualitative research approaches, e.g.
 - a cross-country comparison (Sweden, France, Ireland) to Organic farmers’ beliefs and values
 - similarities and differences in the beliefs and values of Irish conventional and organic beef farmers
- Assessing the socio-ecological trade-offs between intensive and extensive pathways for growth using technical efficiency analysis- cross country comparison of France, Austria, Ireland
- Mapping the progression of animals through the organic value chain to determine the extent of leakage of animals from the organic to the conventional beef sector and the impact of the value chain - Organic Strategy Action using DAFM administrative data
- Comparing the farm level economic and environmental performance of Irish sheep farms based on a bioeconomic model of the sheep production system using the nationally representative Teagasc National Farm Survey (NFS) panel and biological information linked to livestock.

Future research:

- There is a dearth of performance data (physical and financial) for organic Irish dairy farms. Early progress has been made by the LIFT team with the Teagasc International Farm Comparison Network (IFCN) team to collate the necessary information from Teagasc NFS, sectoral stakeholders and expert opinion to develop an Irish ‘typical’ organic dairy farm in order to be able to undertake comparative farm analysis as part of, allowing us to benchmark the performance of Irish organic farms internationally.
- It is planned to undertake research at PhD level on organic beef systems.