



Macra na Feirme

**Opening Statement by Macra na Feirme President John Keane to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Tuesday 14th September at 9.30 am**

Nitrates Action Programme

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address you here today. My name is John Keane, President of Macra na Feirme.

Macra na Feirme welcome the opportunity to submit to the public consultation on Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme. Macra na Feirme are currently hosting a series of farm walks across the country in which members are invited to share their views and opinions on the draft Nitrates Action Programme. We are also hosting a consultation night on 16th September on this very issue to further engage with our members.

The importance of the Nitrates Derogation to a large number of young progressive farmers is an issue that needs careful consideration. Over the past number of years, a large cohort of our members have become highly efficient at converting lush green grass to top-quality milk and all based on a pasture-based production system. It would be a huge mistake for any regulation to force young farmers from driving both financial efficiency and environmental efficiency. The blunt nature of some of the proposals outlined by DAFM is simply unworkable in the timeframes suggested and do not allow for farmers to adopt. It is being demonstrated through programmes such as BRIDE and Signpost Farms that farmers who are farming at higher stock levels can farm to positively influence water quality and the overall environment.

The concerns raised by our members range from affordability to unworkability to constraining. It is the ambition of our young farmers to be the drivers of environmental good practice but not at the

cost of financial stability and a future in the sector. The issue has been raised by our members around the appropriateness of lumping biodiversity, GHG emissions and climate change under a set of proposals to deal with nitrates.

Water Quality

Water Quality is a vital part of not only agriculture but also every single one of our lives. For young farmers, it continues to be important with the vast majority of young farmers placing high importance on water quality in the management of their farms. The acknowledgement is there that we must do more to improve the water quality within our catchment areas. Our members recognise the work being conducted by the ASSAP programme and the positive engagement by farmers in the voluntary programme. Extension of ASSAP and more similar programmes of this nature will drive improvements at farm level. Measures that are introduced must ensure our competitive advantage as a grass based system is protected. The reality must also be conveyed by our representatives at EU level that Irish farming is like no other in the EU, with our unique climate and pasture based systems.

'Banding' of dairy cattle

But it is seen by some Macra na Feirme members as the new 'quota'. There are concerns that with banding that the dual purpose cow will be unduly affected and animals will be selected not on genetics-based on predicted yield.

Slurry Storage & Lengthening of the closed period for zones

The clarification provided by the Department of Agriculture on their information webinar was welcomed by Macra na Feirme. External slurry slatted tanks are considered covered as this measure relates to ammonia losses.

78% of young farmers surveyed said that they have sufficient slurry storage currently on their farms. While 22% of those surveyed planned to add additional storage.

Farmers who have already invested in other aspects of the farm business which have proven to have a greater return on investment e.g. grass, genetics, roadways must be a lead-in period to access grant aid support in order to become compliant.

These farmers who are over 100kg nitrogen per hectare but are not in derogation must be given a sufficient period of time for lead-in, in order to avail of grant aid support.

83% of young farmers members surveyed are not in favour of the lengthening of the closed period for Zones A, B & C post-2022. There are concerns that those who currently have sufficient storage may be negatively affected after then assessments of how much slurry is produced by livestock is completed and communicated.

For example, 40% of dairy farms already don't have sufficient storage and now DAFM is asking farmers to have over 30% additional storage in the next two years you will undoubtedly see more farmers lacking sufficient storage. Macra na Feirme questions if there is the building capacity and if finances are available for this to be accommodated. This all falls on the farmers to bear the costs in such a short space of time.

When the current assessments of how much slurry is produced by livestock are completed and recommendations are made, then farmers need to be given sufficient time to adjust and act.

Chemical Fertiliser Register

Interaction around this has been largely positive. It can be given greater access to the spreading of fertiliser and a better understanding of fertiliser use. Flexibility is needed for those farmers who purchase fertiliser at the end of the year due to cost or other management reasons.

Soiled Water Storage

Macra na Feirme reject the calls that soil water and slurry cannot be mixed. There is a need for flexibility around the soiled water storage requirements. So that if there is sufficient for both soiled water and slurry within the same tank that this is permitted as the planning, cost and hardship involved with creating two separate tanks when there is sufficient storage must not be underestimated.

Spreading

Tillage farmers may come under pressure and stress and may likely choose harvesting and sowing over slurry use. The application of slurry may be a difficult task for some tillage farms if it is to be done by 15th September. This is because they may still be harvesting crops or there may be straw still to be moved off fields.

The extension of the LAWPRO initiative and the extension of the ASSAP scheme after the review as outlined in the programme for government. Additional funding is needed for LAWPRO to allow for it to be expanded.

Economic viability of Irish farms is of the utmost importance. Macra na Feirme are committed to the future young farmers and need assurances that DAFM have give due consideration to the future of the agricultural industry. As future young farmers are deciding whether a career in agriculture is for them and this programme may be one of the key considerations.

Macra na Feirme asks that in the creation and implementation of these programmes and strategies that there is real and serious consideration given to how farmers from across the different enterprises may practically implement the recommendations without falling foul of them.

Ultimately Macra na Feirme need assurances that these measures are based on transparent science and there is sufficient lead-in time provided for farmers to change and adapt successfully if needed.