

**Opening Statement by Prof Thia Hennessy (UCC) to the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture,
Food and the Marine on the topic “Challenges facing the fruit and vegetable industry”**

October 11th 2023

I was pleased to be a member of the committee, chaired by Tom Arnold, that developed the Food Vision 2030 strategy. As part of our deliberations in the development of the strategy, we considered the opportunities and challenges facing the horticultural sector. Given the significant climate change related challenges facing our largely livestock based agricultural sector in Ireland, the strategy recommends the diversification of agriculture in Ireland and the expansion of the horticultural sector. The Food Vision committee noted that from carbon sequestration to enhancing biodiversity such as pollinators, horticultural systems offer many synergies and co-benefits to environmental, economic and social sustainability. The expansion of the sector is also justified in the context of our significant reliance on imported vegetables and fruit with 83% of our national consumption imported. And justified in the context of growing consumer trends towards healthier food choices and increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, consumption in Ireland increased by 7 percent in the last 5 years according to Bord Bia. However, Food Vision 2030 also acknowledges the challenges facing the horticultural sector in terms of the scale required to support a viable business, the high start-up costs, labour shortages and the weak position of the producer in the supply chain and associated output price pressures.

One of the major recommendations of Food Vision 2030 was to “*Develop a strategy to set out the road map for the horticulture industry to 2030*”. In response to this recommendation, the national strategy for horticulture was published in May 2023. The Committee will be familiar with the eight key strategic actions. I will list them here as a reminder;

1. Strengthen the position of the grower in the marketplace,
2. Develop a charter between growers, consolidators and retailers, and increase consumer demand for local, in season, fresh, quality fruit, vegetables and plants,
3. Establish the framework for a permanent non-EEA seasonal workers’ scheme to ensure a reliable supply of skilled seasonal workers, while research into automation is intensified,
4. Review horticulture course availability and suitability for a modern dynamic sector, enabling the educational platforms to attract,
5. Research and Development for the industry,
6. Better data and information for better insights,
7. Integrate Horticulture back into the broader Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System,
8. Support innovation and diversification.

From a personal perspective, as an agricultural economist with 25 years experience, I believe actions 5 and 6 are particularly important. Teagasc does not currently collect data, though the National Farm Survey, or otherwise, on the horticultural sector. There are good reasons for this; i) data may be sensitive and ii) grower numbers in Ireland are small hampering the ability to protect anonymity. We have very rich data on other agricultural sectors allowing us to establish a baseline, track and monitor sustainability indicators, including economic, environmental and social issues and set targets for improvement. The lack of data and insights on the horticultural sector means our research ability is very constrained. For example, without consistent, independent tracking of input costs and production conditions of Irish growers it is difficult to provide advice on what might be considered a

“fair” price for produce and how to best strengthen the position of the producer in the supply chain. This lack of data is linked in part due to more limited AKIS in operation in horticulture compared to other sectors, with more limited use of tools like Profit Monitor etc. Greater investment in data gathering, research and knowledge transfer is important for the future viability of the sector.

Moving on to the issue of food waste and loss which I know is of particular interest of committee members.

The EU estimates that almost one third of food production in the EU is not consumed as it is either lost in the production cycle or wasted at the consumption stage. It is estimated that food waste generates about 8% to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions and as such, reducing food waste is an effective climate action. According to the EU statistics, households generate 54% of food waste, with household food waste being nearly twice the amount of food waste arising from the sectors of primary production and manufacturing. Food waste in Ireland is the 5th highest in the EU and is about 15% ahead of the EU average.

According to EPA statistics households are the biggest producers of food waste in Ireland, accounting for 29% of the total in 2021, with manufacturing and processing accounting for an estimated 28%, restaurants and food services generating approximately 25% of all waste. Only 7% of food waste is generated at the primary level. An EPA-funded research report on Reducing Commercial Food Waste in Ireland published in 2019 found that vegetables are the most commonly wasted food type in both the food service sector and retail sector. A Teagasc study of consumer behaviour also found that fruit and vegetables are the most commonly wasted food stuff by households. Spoilage, expiration and overbuying are the three most common reasons for food waste in Irish households. The study recommends support for greater awareness of best before dates, more mindful shopping, packaging innovation by food companies and revised packaging formats by retailers.

Food Vision 2030 sets the ambition that Ireland should become a leader in tackling food waste and meet the UN SDG target of halving per capita food waste by 2030. The actions called out to support the delivery of this particular ambition include;

- the implementation of to the DECC’s *Waste Action Plan* and in particular the actions relevant to agriculture,
- the development of a *National Food Waste Prevention Roadmap* and
- research into the extent of food loss at the production (primary) stage in an Irish context, and develop innovative ways of reducing it.

Food Vision 2030 calls out that an important element will be developing a common methodology for measuring and reporting food waste across food processing companies. As the responsible body for reporting food waste statistics, the EPA has a number of projects ongoing in this area. Origin Green could act as a vehicle for facilitating food industry actions, in close collaboration with the EPA. Redistribution is a further important element so that the food waste hierarchy is followed and this can also play an important role in dealing with shocks in supply chains due to unforeseen events (e.g. Covid) while additionally offering positive social impacts.

The Committee learned from the experience of the Meade Potato Company from Lobinstown, County Meath, where a portion of every crop was either left behind in the field or outside of the specification. Previously their entire surplus to requirements produce previously went for stock feed and to community food banks but, they challenged themselves to find higher food value alternatives.

- They invested in a peeling and chipping line using potatoes that had initially been graded as surplus to requirements.
- The by-product from the peeling process was initially fed to beef cattle, but with the installation of a starch extractor they now produce food grade starch Ireland's only indigenous starch ingredient
- With FoodCloud they engaged in gleaning, i.e. where produce left behind in the field is picked up and distributed to those in need.

Finally, it is clear that further research and education is required to tackle the food waste issue, much can be learned from case studies like the Meade Potato Company.