

I'm Dr. Oliver Moore of the [Centre for Co-operative Studies in University College Cork](#), and [ARC2020](#), a European think tank on agri-food policy matters. Thanks for the opportunity to speak today. My focus is on three areas with the potential to significantly impact climate change mitigation, adaptation, biodiversity and indeed other public goods. These are organic farming, eco-schemes and scrub/agroforestry. What is presented here today orally is a shortened version of a longer, fully referenced submission, please refer to this for more substantial considerations and evidence.

Organic can be described as a brilliant all-rounder in the delivery of public goods. The latest organic regulation states that “organic production is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines **best environmental** and **climate action practices**, a high level of **biodiversity**, the preservation of **natural resources** and the application of **high animal welfare standards**.”

Research shows **enhanced environmental benefits** in the areas of **biodiversity, landscape, soil, ground and surface water, climate and air, energy** and reduced **exposure to pesticides for workers and consumers**.

There is little Irish research into organics and sustainability, but I would draw the Committee's attention to organic farming's positive performance in a series of publications by Drs Eileen Power and Jane Stout of TCD on biodiversity.

Research suggests organic farms can be more viable; provide 10-20% more employment per ha; provide women an easier entry-point into farming; and have a younger age base. Organic can thus synergise coherently with [Our Rural Future](#).

Ireland suits organic due to our clean green image, the length of our grazing season, and the fact that we are agri-food exporter to EU markets that increasingly want it. Looking forward, organic is well positioned regarding the carbon budget, an EU carbon border adjustment mechanism, tightening EU rules on animal welfare, pesticides and more.

However the reality is that organic farm viability needs to be further supported. There are, with sheepmeat and to a lesser extent beef, price pressures and leakage into the conventional sector. There is the lack of an economy of scale with a diffuse spread of farmers around Ireland, and a well below EU average payment rate.

Ireland has one of the lowest shares of organic farmland in the whole of the EU. Ireland has an organic action plan, but it is both [unambitious and is likely to fail to significantly grow the sector](#).

New data sourced this month by this witness shows that the Department of Agriculture dedicates about E15 million of [E1.8 Billion](#) budget to organic farming directly. Bord Bia

dedicates about 2% of its budget to organic food promotion. In a context of a 5% (2020) or 7.5% (2030) target for organic Utilisable Land Area (UAA), this is clearly far too low.

Supports are however emerging via the [EU Organic Action Plan](#). These include, in particular, supports for marketing and for Research and Development. Horizon Europe's "Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Areas" intervention will dedicate at least 30% of funds to "topics specific to or relevant for the organic sector."

There is a need for a **comprehensive full agri-food system approach** to developing organics at **policy, production, research, extension services, processing, distribution, advocacy and consumption** ends. These must be done simultaneously and publicly, so as to develop confidence in the sector. This should be coupled with the **levelling of the playing field** by fully complying with EU and national environmental law and targets in water quality, reducing absolute emissions, and more.

A comprehensive new Organic Action Plan is needed. There are a range of **recommendations** in the longer submission, below are some highlights.

- Far higher payment rates of about E500 per hectare for grassland systems, and proportionally more for arable (E600) and horticulture (E700), or priority access to other agri-environmental schemes.
- Scoring prioritisation for direct selling producers for entry
- Immediate progress towards 7.5% of Bord Bia and 7.5% of Department of Agriculture budgets for organics, with 7.5% achieved by 2026.
- Establishment of **organic advocacy organisation**, with initial funding of **E150,000 per year**.
- Trial EIP for conversion to organic using blockchain technology to achieve group organic certification as per the new organic regulation. Roll out of this approach on a regional basis by 2026. Market blockchain alignment thereafter.
- Mandated, ring fenced and rising levels of organic public procurement with no conflation with Bord Bia Quality Assured, as has happened previously

Can it be done? Yes. Irish authorities need to learn from best practices from [Austria](#), Denmark, [France](#) (esp [Brittany](#) and [Normandy](#)), as detailed in the longer submission.

**Eco-schemes** is the second of three policy interventions proposed. Eco-schemes will be an integral part Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan.

The Department appears likely to use the following broad categories:

Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation  
Sustainable and Efficient Management of Natural Resources  
Biodiversity and enhanced ecosystem services  
Animal Health and Welfare

A points-based system will be used to give farmers flexibility while also rewarding those who are doing more for the environment. This needs to be transparent, monitoring and evaluation needs to be clear, consistent and coherent, and the relationship between conditionality, pillar two and

the rest of CAP needs to be clear and consistent too - eco-schemes must go beyond conditionality and must respect the no backsliding principle. In other words, clearing scrub for birdboxes on poles shouldn't happen.

Recommendations here are for measures that

- Encourage the verifiable reduction in, and/or work without, the use of fertilizer and pesticides;
- Prioritise high nature value habitats;
- Increase riparian zones and careful catch crop integration
- Enhance and widen the definition of existing habitats to include ponds, wet grasslands, wetlands and wet flushes.
- Retaining winter stubble on arable land
- While animal welfare and precision farming are **not** suitable for eco-schemes.

*As a related point – in light of the recommendations from the [European Court of Auditors](#) yesterday, which lists as one of just three recommendations to “Take steps to reduce emissions from cultivated drained organic soils” I would like to emphasise **GAEC 2 Preservation of carbon rich soils such as peatlands and wetlands** – this has the single most potential to deliver on climate targets within CAP. To support this, creative use of eco-schemes should be made for farmers in these lands to help with their income, while the designation should remain agricultural.*

Finally, we also need a new approach to scrub and a new agroforestry scheme. There are promising signs that the new CAP will allow a proportion of land to have [scrub and still count as an eligible acre](#). This could add 55,000 eligible hectares in the next CAP. Carefully managed, this could lead to native forestry regeneration.

Ireland's [Agroforestry Scheme](#) needs to be lengthened and broadened. Currently it provides support for just five years. For trees, 10 to 15 years is optimal. The replanting obligation of the Forestry Act needs to be relaxed so that farmers can be encouraged to try agroforestry without being locked into trees forever on their land. Alley cropping and forest farming should also be encouraged in the Scheme. The [Joint Environmental Pillar, Stop Climate Chaos and SWAN agri-food policy document](#) has more on the development of a full suite of agroforestry measures.

Real, comprehensive support for the organic sector, ambitious immediately impactful eco-schemes, and a new attitude to scrub and tree integration into farmlands, are three clear ways we can soberly face into the rapidly emerging climate and biodiversity collapses happening all around us. Farming has its role to play - now - in a real and just transition. These are three ways it can help us to do so.