Macra na Feirme

Opening Statement by Macra na Feirme President John Keane to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action Tuesday 22nd June 2021, 12.30 pm

Discussion on the Climate Action and Low-Carbon Development Bill

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to speak with you all today. My name is John Keane, President of Macra na Feirme. I am joined virtually by Shane Fitzgerald, Chair of the Agricultural Affairs committee and Gillian Richardson, Macra na Feirme Policy Officer.

Agriculture is one of the major land uses and as a result is identified as the main factor in the status of habitat, water bodies and increasingly a focus of greenhouse gas emissions. Ireland has the largest percentage of agricultural land in the EU at 71.6% with 4.9 million hectares as of 2016. Ireland, unlike many other European states, is dominated by grassland with one of the highest percentage of Utilized Agricultural Area under grassland with 83% of UAA. The remainder is made up of cereals (280,400 ha) followed by crops, fruit and horticulture (71,000 ha) and rough grazing (16,300 ha) (CSO Ireland, 2018). Due to the temperate climate influenced by the Atlantic, the most common form of agricultural activity is grass based beef and dairy.

Rural Economies are dominated by employment in Agri-Food as the most important indigenous industry with 164,400 people employed, 71% of total employment (DAFM, 2021). Ireland is primarily a food exporting nation with €13bn generated in 2020 from the export of food and drink

internationally (Bord Bia, 2021).

The target reduction for 2030 within the new bill is twice that which was agreed just two years ago by the last government. If this target reduction is applied equally, a 51% reduction target for agriculture is more than trebling the previously set target of 10-15%. It is unrealistic to target the reduction of biogenic methane emissions as this reduction can threaten the entire future of the livestock sector. When we examine possible solutions around dealing with biogenic methane the route that New Zealand have taken in accounting for this form of methane is worth noting. The commitment in the programme for Government also lays out clear indication for a move in a similar direction. This sector not only supports over 100,000 farmers and their families but also, they in turn invest in their local towns and villages. In what shape or form will the support be for rural areas when livihoods are ruined and rural areas wither. How will those living in rural areas be protected?

Ireland remains a member state with one of the highest rates of environmental quality in the EU, with the second highest percentage of high-status waters sites (19%), with only Austria having a greater number. In addition, 57% of river water and 54% of lakes are in high or good biological quality as of 2019 (EPA, 2020).

In addition to this both the nature of greenhouse gas emissions picture from Ireland and ecology are heavily influenced by agricultural activity. Ireland remains one of the least industrialized countries in western Europe with a significant proportion of economic activity created in the agri-food sector. Ireland is also primarily grass-based ruminant agriculture due in primarily to a temperate high rainfall climate and common soil types. These factors result in a high level of farmland biodiversity but also a significant proportion of national greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture.

This far-reaching Climate Action Bill has impacts across multiple sectors including agriculture, which in turn affects all of rural Ireland. The sectoral targets to be agreed in the coming months will play a vital role in determining the success or not of any measures to reduce our emissions. Policies and targets must be realistic, achievable and supported in order to deliver the best outcome for farm families and the environment. Schemes and interventions must be complimentary to good farming practices and must allow for time to development and support for farmers.
When we look at the work carried out by Teagasc recently to develop the MACC curve and the plethora of science and research that was delivered to develop the model, it is a clear roadmap forward for the

industry. Developed only a couple of years ago with targets that appear now to be redundant how can the sector move forward with a clear roadmap for success if the goalposts continue to move. What the sector needs is a science based, financially sound roadmap for delivery of targets. It is incredulous to think that we have enacted legislation that will affect every crossroads of rural Ireland without an economic assessment on its impact.

Generational Renewal

The question of generational renewal is often considered outside of the context of these environmental challenges however this is a fundamental to achieving these aims. Updates to agricultural education have ensured that many young farmers are now more keenly aware of the environmental challenges and the impact upon the environment of older methods. Based on 2016 figures, Ireland has less than 5% of farmers under the age of 35 because young trained farmers are not able to access the land or credit they need. If we are to change practices, we must change the make up of the farming industry. Young farmers must be better catered for, because more of the same is not going to address the issue of generational renewal. As Albert Einstein said, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results".

Young farmers do care about the environment and want to ensure that there is a successful future for the industry, but these two statements are not in contradiction of each other. They can result in the same bright future for agriculture and for the rural communities it supports. Young farmers have shown a clear commitment over the past 7 years with over 186m invested through TAMS measures on farm through CAP supports.

Carbon Sequestration

Teagasc point out that Irish mineral soils, mainly grassland, storing 1,832 MT CO_2e. This is the equivalent to 90 times what the agriculture sector emits pet year. Our soils cannot be ignored. They must be included in the context of calculating the sector's emissions profile or alternatively in the future its financial value in terms of carbon credits.

Carbon Sequestration

Macra na Feirme recognises the success of the ASSAP programme and wants to see a similar programme set up, applying the same methodology to carbon sequestration. Macra na Feirme would like to see funding for a programme offering free advice and guidance to farmers.

In the programme for government, the government already committed to undertaking a national land use review which will include farmland, forests, and peatlands and will include the consideration of emissions to air and water, carbon sequestration, as well as climate adaptation challenges. Macra na Feirme would recommend a service model based on the success of ASSAP which clarified the potential and impact of agricultural activities on soil carbon and potential losses and sequestration. This is of particular importance given the conflicting messages in circulation to farmers and the increased focus on the potential of reduced drainage and rewetting to reduce agricultural emissions.

Germany and Poland have acquired financial support from the EU to assist in their green transition of the fossil fuel and heavy industry, so too must Ireland acquire similar support this green transition of the agricultural sector. So that rural people aren't again being asked to pay the price for what was decided for them.

Above all rural people, farmers and young farmers need policies that are going to deliver for them in terms of economics but also in terms of future possibilities. We cannot create a sector that is laden with restrictive legislation while simultaneously becoming an unattractive career option for young people.

ENDS