



Introduction

My name is Donal Sheehan and I am a dairy farmer, milking 72 spring-calving dairy cows in Castlelyons, part of the Bride valley area of North Cork. I would like to express some concerns I have with the direction our farming and food system is taking, and in particular, that the road that we are now on, as a result of the Food Harvest 2020 and Foodwise 2025 Strategies, is unsustainable.

As well as being a farmer I am also one of the people involved in the BRIDE Project (Biodiversity Regeneration In a Dairying Environment). This project is one of the many European Innovation Partnership Projects (EIP's) scattered throughout the country, set up to provide templates and knowledge transfer for the wider agricultural community on different aspects of environmental and sustainable food production practices. It is funded by the Dept of Ag and the EU.

The BRIDE Project was initiated by 2 farmers and an ecologist all frustrated at the way our farming system was damaging the environment while farmers themselves were being blamed by the public. There was a need to showcase a more positive image as well as improving biodiversity and water quality and reducing our carbon footprint.

The system we are on rewards farmers for producing larger and larger volumes of food – the more you produce the more money you make. Consequently, there is no value put on the habitats on any farm that can deliver the environmental eco-system services that can help to create a more sustainable food production model.

This is fundamentally what needs to change, farmers are paid to produce food but they also need to be paid for managing the farmland habitats in a way that improves biodiversity, water quality and carbon sequestration. There is a need to give farmers a continuous signal that there is an indefinite financial value in maintaining and managing these vital habitats from generation to generation. The present model of getting a payment from Agri-environment schemes for a 5 year term is not working as habitats (created from taxpayers money through the scheme) can be put back into food production when the scheme is terminated. Habitats have very little legal protection so damaging or removing them routinely occurs.

The Expansion Model and it's problems

The environment has played second fiddle to production and volume of food produced, over the last 50 years with a resultant deterioration in its quality.

Since quotas were abolished in 2015 and indeed since preparations began for same back in 2010, farmers have been pushed to produce more for the same money, with the result being damage to wildlife habitats, biodiversity and water quality. We are also struggling to reduce our carbon footprint and the public backlash that dairy farmers in particular, are now getting, is a direct result of the unsustainable food production system we've been on. This same model has done a lot of damage to rural Ireland with small farmers coming under increasing pressure to stay afloat and many of them have gone out of business. The media narrative often focuses on the "family farm" – it sounds good but we need to define "family farm". It is taking an increasingly larger farm to sustain a family and most farms require one of the partners to work off farm. This puts more pressure on the farmer to get more work done, to milk higher numbers of stock and so extra labour is needed which is becoming more and more difficult to source. Once a labour unit is sourced, inevitably more cows are also sourced to pay for the labour and thus begins the treadmill on which dairy farmers now find themselves – this is the dairy expansion model – not the family farm model and certainly not the "viable" small farmer model. The average herd size in the Glanbia area is now over 80 cows so under this figure would be classed as a small dairy farmer. For farmers in the less intensive farming areas of the country with smaller herd sizes again, supplying smaller co-op's, this puts them at an unfair disadvantage when competing against such scale.

In dairy farming, the milking platform (land area adjacent to the milking parlour) is the limiting factor to expansion, so to expand i.e. increase production to stay viable, as price for milk to the farmer is more or less static over the years, farmers require more land. In my own area, land rental costs can be up to and more than €300/acre/annum – to buy this land would cost a minimum of €10-15,000/acre and more, if 2 farmers want it badly enough. So, to increase herd size by 50 cows would require 50 extra acres costing a minimum of €0.5m – the smaller the scale, the less chance of being able to get on this unsustainable ladder.

To give an actual example of what's happening on the ground, in my own case, I have 2 tillage neighbours, 1 bloodstock neighbour, 1 suckler neighbour and 2 dairy farmer neighbours. For any of us to expand would mean to buy the adjoining farm and put them out of business – The only way for me (or them) to expand is to buy an adjoining farm. This is the model we are on and is leading to smaller farmers getting out, an ultimate decline in overall farmer numbers and ultimately a depleted rural community.

This model is pitting farmers against farmers, dairy farmers against each other and against every other farm enterprise and as can be publicly seen, pitting farmers against environmentalists and the consumer.

Everyone is talking about the extra jobs that dairy expansion is giving, no one is talking about the numbers of small farmers that cannot compete and are going out of business. Small farmers do not have the purchasing power that large scale farming brings e.g.

- prices are cheaper when products are bought in large orders
- small farmers cannot compete when it comes to buying and renting land, there needs to be a minimum land area on which a farmer can make a living otherwise we are on the road back to the landlord system.
- The minimum milk collection policy in my own area has now increased from 250 litres per collection to 400 litres per collection – this is just another nail in the coffin of small milk producers.

Because this model is totally production focused and with no incentive to look after biodiversity or any other ecosystem service, farmers are sent the signal to produce more and more to fuel the relentless drive for a commodity product that can be sourced cheaply. Inevitably more and more fertiliser is used, more sprays are used on any plant that is competition to the crop, wetlands are drained, hedgerows are removed, woodland and forestry converted to grassland etc. etc. (all legally, habitats have very little protection especially in intensive farming areas where most of the food is produced).

There has been a continuous push on farmers to produce more and more for less and less with a devastating impact on the environment.

10% “Space for Nature”

While a figure of 10% of the farmed area “prioritised” for biodiversity is mentioned in the Green Deal, Biodiversity Strategy and Food Strategy 2030, no timeliness or guidelines have been given on how this will be achieved or where the money will come from. In practice this will mean some farmers may need to take land out of food production to attain the 10%.

When land is taken out of agricultural production, it should be replaced with an environmental payment equivalent that incentivises the farmer on an ongoing and indefinite basis to deliver the ecosystem services that alternative land uses can provide such as clean water, flood prevention, more biodiversity, carbon sequestration etc. etc. This payment should be results-based as in the BRIDE Project template so that farmers will be incentivised to manage their land both for environmental benefits and food production.

The present CAP payment structure should be reformed to include an environmental payment to farmers for this 10%. This puts a value on the habitats and biodiversity that are being lost and sends a signal to the farmer that maintaining these habitats is important. It is a payment from the taxpayer to the farmer for delivering ecosystem services at a time when we have a global climate and biodiversity crisis.

Ireland Ag. is at a crossroads - we are going down the road of increased expansion and racing to the bottom of the barrel to be the most efficient food producers in the world but with the worst environmental record and a farming population that are tired and stressed in that race. Our future young farmers will have other more profitable and rewarding occupations to choose from with better work conditions if we do not make changes.

Our credibility and the Origin Green credibility is under serious threat, we cannot any longer claim to be sustainable food producers while the public are well aware of the environmental problems that intensive farming is causing. Time has caught up on poor and lax environmental care over the years because of bad short-term policy.

In recent discussions on the Food Strategy 2030 document, it has been suggested that “there needs to be give and take” – in my opinion there has been too much take from the farmers and the environment over the last 20 years, both have been exploited and this needs to change.

The Solution

Everyone is kicking the dairy cow numbers issue down the road but we cannot have our cake and eat it. At the high stocking rates (over 2.4 cows/ha) that are being encouraged this will mean high artificial nitrogen usage and very little space for nature.

If artificial N use was curtailed, it would encourage farmers to utilise fertilisers and slurry more efficiently. Reducing N use will have a positive impact on our emissions and in my opinion, it won't have the negative impact on grass production that we're told.

The BRIDE Project has created a template to help farmers achieve a 10% “Space For Nature” certification (“Farming With Nature”) which is also an objective of the previous aforementioned strategies. This creates a minimum standard that rewards farmers who are looking after the environment. We have recently received further funding from the Dept. of Ag and the EU through the EIP funding initiative, where we were given over €100,000 to create an app that will measure the quantity and quality of biodiversity on any farm. This will be the basis of a “Farming With Nature” standard that any farm in Ireland can have and should be the basis of any food we export abroad. We are at present liaising with one of the meat processors whereby they will trial a “Farming With Nature” certified beef range with a payment being returned to the farmer for this certification.

Farming with Nature Certification



	Ha	%	PAYMENT		
BASELINE BMA, 2019	3.948	10.51%	€1,579	TARGET SPECIES PAYMENT	€0
ADDITIONAL BMA	0.066	0.18%	€66	TARGET HABITAT PAYMENT	€300
TOTAL BMA, 2020	4.014	10.68%	€1,645	8+ HABITATS PRESENT	€100
NUMBER OF HABITATS, 2019	6	NUMBER OF HABITATS, 2020	8	TOTAL PAYMENT, 2020	€3,445
QUANTITATIVE SCORE		QUALITATIVE SCORE		FARMLAND BIODIVERSITY INDEX (FBI)	11 B
SCORE	10.68%	SCORE	76%		
AREA	4.014 Ha	GRADE	B		
PAYMENT	€1,645	PAYMENT	€1,800		



FARMING with NATURE

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that

John Doe

is

Farming with Nature

Farm Biodiversity Index

2021

11 B

Summary

We need to change from a production at the lowest cost model where the processors and retailers are forcing farmers down a road they don't want to go, to a regenerative farming model* where the farmer, the soil and the quality of the food produced will lead to a more sustainable food production system and ultimately a healthier consumer.

We are at a crossroads in dairy farming – we can go down the road of continuous expansion with farms getting larger and larger but farmers becoming less and less and the consequences that has on rural Ireland. We are trying to compete with the big dairy countries of the world on scale but we are losing out on the quality of food we produce, the quality of our water, the quality of our life, and biodiversity. We need to put a value on all of these things so that we can truly say we are sustainable food producers and proud of it.

Kind regards,
Donal Sheehan

* “Regenerative agriculture is not one production system. It includes many ideas and practices that may be found under the banners of organics, conservation agriculture, pasture-fed, agroecology, agroforestry and holistic management. Regenerative agriculture is about working with Nature’s many natural cycles to provide nutritious food with a minimum environmental footprint. It is also about the regeneration of the families that are at the heart of so many food systems. It is about their economic viability and their rewards being derived from the consumer, not the taxpayer. This will all mean systemic change and Regenerative Farming Ireland [RFI] has been established to help Irish farmers and growers make that change”. - ‘FARM 2 FORK 2030’ a truly green farming, food and rural vision of Ireland