

Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss report and funding and economics of nature restoration

Tuesday, 24 October

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Opening Statement

- I thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee for the invitation to contribute to its consideration of the report of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. The report is both a clarion call of crisis, and an inspirational framework for action.
- Central to this story is the economics of the status quo, but more fundamentally than this, it is a story of people. What is the future of people who live and work on land and water, on coast and on sea? What is the future of the people in rural Ireland?
- The status quo is driving the biodiversity crisis, declines in water quality, increased greenhouse gas emissions, to name a few...
- At the same time, as acknowledged by the IFA member that spoke to the Citizen's Assembly, most farms in Ireland are not financially viable. The status quo does not benefit most farmers, and often puts them at increased financial risk. We are upholding this status quo by considerable public subsidy.
- The status quo, built on maximising production, cheap food policy and driving export demand for dairy and meat, is not working for rural Ireland and it is not working for biodiversity.
- My background is in considering shifts in where we are going, and in the economics of possibility. I spent eight years developing a globally pioneering approach to bring together sustainability and wellbeing¹, in other words, to put human wellbeing and nature at the very centre of what we do. Not only is it clear that these goals can be aligned, a key thing that I have learned on this journey, is the importance of reflecting on how we 'frame' our analysis and policy. What and whom is prioritised within, and to whom is this beneficial?
- Instead of the status quo, what would it look like, if we put rural people, rural livelihoods and nature, together, at the centre of what we do? Instead of taking the approach that squeezes farmers, and squeezes nature, what would a vibrant, prosperous and sustainable rural Ireland look like?
- The international literature is very clear that in an economics of change, there are substantial opportunities for livelihoods. But, in Ireland we do not yet have the analysis that allows us to fully understand these opportunities, and all of the benefits these could provide, across the wider range of public policy priorities.
- Economic analysis often considers the current path and not the alternatives, the economic costs and not the many benefits, economic and beyond.
- In an economics of change, to support more enhancement of biodiversity, and more support for transition to environmentally enhancing activities, we will need to pursue funding innovations. In public funding, we need to consider re-direction of existing subsidies as a

¹ O'Mahony, T. (2022). Toward Sustainable Wellbeing: Advances in Contemporary Concepts. *Front. Sustain.* 3:807984 <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2022.807984>

critically important measure, switching from environmental pressure to environmental enhancement. Channelling the revenue of environmental taxation and considering the general budget of tax and spend are other options. There may also be opportunities to harness private funding and EU supports, and these will need to be explored.

- We know the current approach is dysfunctional, and we know that we can't stand still.
- We need to re-consider our priorities and put farmers, rural livelihoods and nature at the centre of what we do, we need to reflect on what would a flourishing and prosperous future look like?
- We need to move from preserving stasis to building vision and collaboration, from an economics of the status quo to an economics of change, and from a policy of survival to a policy of flourishing for sustainable wellbeing.
- The interests, identities, values and voices of the people concerned, and particularly of those in rural Ireland, are central to moving from the challenge to the opportunity.