Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action

Thursday, 30th November 2023 (9.30 to 11am)

Committee's review of the Climate Action Plan 2023 following the publication of the Climate Change Advisory Council's annual review

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Opening Statement by Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue, TD

Thank you, Cathaoirleach and members of the Committee for the invitation and opportunity to discuss the agriculture and Land Use Land Use and Forestry Chapter of the Climate Change Advisory Council's Annual Review.

We have binding commitments to deliver on reducing emissions whether through the Paris Agreement, our commitments as a Member of the EU and at home, through our targets as set out in the Climate Act.

The Government has committed to a whole of economy 51% target by 2030, and to reducing by 25% the agriculture sector's emissions by 2030. In response, Ireland's **Climate Action Plan 2023** sets outs how we can accelerate the actions and measures required to respond to the climate crisis, ensuring climate solutions are at the centre of Ireland's social and economic development.

The Climate Action Plan commits the agriculture sector to strong climate action and I have introduced measures to achieve abatement potential in the agriculture sector.

The **CAP Strategic Plan with a budget of €9.8 billion** will support farmers to transition to more sustainable practices while also supporting family farm incomes. In addition, a budget of €1.5 billion for the new agri-environment scheme ACRES, a five-fold increase in funding for Organic Farming to €256

million to triple the area to 7.5% of utilised agricultural area and €260 million to improve the carbon efficiency of the suckler herd through genetic improvement.

I also committed **€43 million for a major genotyping programme** for Irish cattle in May 2023. This programme will enhance the environmental sustainability, health and productivity of Irish beef and dairy herds. This is a voluntary genotyping programme, which is available to both beef and dairy herd owners, and will run over a five year period from 2023 until 2027. It represents a significant step towards genotyping of the national bovine herd. I believe by harnessing genetic data, the programme will empower Irish farmers to make informed breeding decisions, optimise herd management and animal welfare, and contribute towards Ireland's climate action targets.

The implementation of **a low methane emitting breeding programme** has significant potential to harness the genetic variation for methane emissions that exists within the national herd, this, in turn, will bring about permanent and cumulative reductions in the Methane output of future generations of livestock. The results of the research also highlight the potential to breed more environmentally sustainable animals, while at the same time, not having a negative impact on food production. Progress continues to be made in relation to feed additives, which will have a significant positive impact on reducing emissions.

2023 has seen the introduction of a **National Fertiliser Database**. This will allow my Department to collect a range of information on fertiliser products as well as details of fertiliser economic operators and end users.

It will also support farmers in reducing usage and engaging with industry led sustainability measurement.

Nitrogen reduction is also supported through the continuation of aid for **Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment.** Over 5,100 applications have been paid in full under the LESS measure of the Targeted Agricultural Modernization Scheme 2 since its launch in 2015. From 2023, funding for this measure will increase from 40% to 60% under the recently launched TAMS 3 scheme.

Alongside reducing the chemical fertiliser allowances for farmers under Nitrates legislation, we are encouraging the adoption of protected urea, which will help to achieve ammonia emissions targets in addition to GHG emissions reductions. These changes can have benefits for the environment as well as profitability at farm level through a reduction in input costs.

My Department is also supporting the taking and analysis of up to 90,000 samples through phase two of **the soil sampling and analysis program** over the next 12 to 18 months. Phase two will build on data gathered during the initial programme by providing valuable information to farmers to inform decisions that promote the health of their soils. Nutrient management and soil health are central to achieving economic and environmental sustainability on farms. DAFM has allocated €8.8 million to this programme, on top of this €2.5 million for multi-species swards in 2024. These supports will enable farmers to reduce chemical fertiliser inputs, an economic benefit to the farmer and an environmental benefit to society while maintaining food production.

- We know that some livestock farmers will take up diversification options that are provided as part of our climate transformation including areas such as Organics, Forestry, Tillage and the provision of feedstock for Anaerobic Digestion (AD) as we increase the production of renewables. However, given the efficiency gains that continue to be made at farm level, I remain confident that we will continue to reduce emissions in the agri-food sector without

reducing our agri-output through the following measures:**Agri-Centric Biomethane Production** - It is estimated that up to 160,000 ha of land may be needed for an expanded AD industry of 5.7TWh, to grow feedstock of 1.3M tonnes dry matter assuming 8 tonnes of grass DM per ha. A Strategy to guide the development of this sector, co-led by my Department and the Department of Environment, Climate Action and Communications is being finalised for publication shortly.

- **Tillage -** Our target as set out in the Climate Action Plan is to increase the area of land devoted to tillage production to 400,000 ha by 2030, building on an increased area of 6% in 2022 over 2021 to approximately 339,000 ha. This will help build in greater resilience and self-sufficiency in terms of feed stocks and food security. Under the Food Vision Strategy, a group focused on tillage has been meeting under the chairmanship of Matt Dempsey to propose recommendations on delivering on this ambition.

- The **new Organic Farming Scheme** opened for applications in Autumn 2023 and resulted in a doubling of the number of farmers farming organically. In addition, substantial advisory supports have been introduced for organic farming. The Agricultural Consultants Association have received funding from my Department in 2022 and 2023 to upskill advisors and hold organic farm walks. Teagasc and my Department jointly fund the new Growing Organics monitor farm programme which was launched in Spring 2023 and will run for 5 years promoting best practice at farm level.

- **Forestry -** Carbon sequestration is one of a range of important services being provided by sustainably managing forests. The new Forestry programme which was launched in September 2023, as well as developing, adopting and assessing Coillte's Strategic Vision, will enable us to capture additional carbon dioxide in forestry, soils and wood products by 2050.

On knowledge transfer, the Teagasc Signpost Programme, supported by my Department is working with Irish farmers and a partnership of over 60 partner and supporter organisations across the agri-food sector, to reduce Green House Gas emissions, reduce Ammonia emissions, reduce nutrient losses, enhance biodiversity, and improve the efficiency of food production. A cohort of 100 Signpost demonstration farms is at the centre of the Signpost Programme and cover all mainland-based enterprises. The objective of the Signpost farms will be to employ the emerging new technologies, such as new breeding programmes and feed additives, and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from these farms to every farm in Ireland.

With the support of my Department; Teagasc, the Irish Cattle Breeding Federation and Bord Bia are jointly developing a toolkit of tailored farm sustainability support and solutions for Irish farmers called **AgNav**. From 2024, it is targeted that 10,000 farmers will be utilising the platform each year. The platform will enable an analysis of an individual farms emissions and aid the farmer together with his climate advisor to identify the best measures on climate action and sustainability for implementation on their farm.

Critical to delivering our 2030 and 2050 commitments **is Science, innovation and knowledge exchange.** Research supported by my Department and other public

research funders will provide new tools and technologies to mitigate and offset agricultural emissions which was profiled earlier this month at our inaugural "Science into Action" Conference. Over the last 10 years, my Department has allocated **€59.3 million** on climate, agri-environment, and biodiversity research in agriculture. This is comprised of:

- €46.5 million on climate, GHG emission mitigation, adaptation, carbon sequestration, national inventories and climate-related co-benefit research.
- €12.9 million on agri-environment for improving water quality and reducing ammonia emissions, improving agroecosystems for biodiversity, high-nature value farmland, and sustainable agroecology farming systems, such as organics and agroforestry.

By way of practical example: in 2020 my Department provided funding of over €2 million for the establishment of a 'National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory' by supplying the scientific infrastructure to measure GHG fluxes from soils under agricultural management. This technology will enable researchers to assess the impact of reduced management intensity on organic soils under agricultural management which is a key action area under the 2023 Climate Action Plan. This project comprises of 30 "Flux Towers" spread across a range of soil types, under different management regimes throughout Ireland. This project is placing Ireland at the forefront of EU carbon sequestration research.

My officials are **collaborating closely with the EPA** and the relevant technical experts to enhance the projections modelling on the mitigation measures identified in the Climate Action Plan**.** It is important through this collaboration

to ensure that gaps in the research are identified and recommendations are made for the improvement of the Inventory from a Forestry, Agriculture and Land Use and Land Use Change perspective.

Conclusion

Cathaoirleach, thank you again for the invitation to speak to you all here today and to allow me the opportunity to outline the ongoing work by my Department in achieving our climate ambitions.