

Speech by Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Charlie McConalogue TD
Teagasc Ashtown
Thursday 1 December 2022

Launch of the Teagasc Climate Action Strategy 2022- 2030

Teagasc chairman Liam Herlihy, director Frank O'Mara and everyone in the Authority, I am delighted to be here this morning to launch the Teagasc Climate Action Strategy.

As a sector and an industry, we are lucky to have an agency like Teagasc at our disposal. The importance of your research cannot be underestimated.

Teagasc, through developing and then disseminating cutting edge research, will ensure that agriculture meets its ambitious and challenging climate targets before the end of the decade.

Putting it bluntly. We cannot do it without you. We are on a journey to reach a target of a 25% reduction in our emissions before the end of the decade.

We will now shortly publish a new Climate Action Plan for 2023. This Plan will be the first climate action plan that sets legal carbon budgetary limits on the amount of carbon dioxide emissions the sector can emit.

These budgets will challenge the sector like never before, and I have no doubt that research is key to unlocking the technologies that will be needed to drive down our emissions over the coming years and further improve the sustainability of our sector.

The farmers of Ireland are now looking to the Government and to Teagasc for leadership in order to bridge the gap.

I know we are both committed to delivering for our farm families – to ensure that we will forge a brighter and more sustainable a future.

A future where tomorrow is better than today and where there is a sector that the next generation will inherit that will be a stronger footing and insulated from the challenges we will face.

But there will be change, there will be challenges and things will look differently in 2030 than they do now. But what is for certain is that our family-farms will produce top-class, safe and sustainable food that is backed by the most recent science and is done so in harmony with nature.

As we know, urgent action is needed in all sectors to reduce emissions and increase carbon sequestration, and the farming and agriculture sector has its part in meeting this challenge.

That action will be driven by the crucial research that is taking place in Teagasc and the universities, a lot of which has been funded by competitive grants from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

This research needs to be accelerated, and extremely well focused, so we have more solutions well before 2030.

That's why I am delighted to see that Teagasc has established a 'virtual' National Centre for Agri-Food Climate Research and Innovation to achieve closer collaboration across all its researchers, working in multiple locations.

Of course, we will also rely on the advisory and education element of the Teagasc function.

The existing Signpost Programme launched in 2021, with 120 demonstration farms is unique internationally, and demonstrates the collective commitment by farmers, industry, farm organisations, semi state organisations and my own department, along with all those involved in the sector, to take action to address this climate challenge.

As well as the 120 farms, there are 62 stakeholders from the sector who are backing the Signpost Programme which shows just how we all are invested in seeing the benefits of this pioneering and innovative initiative.

It is also an indication of the importance that farmers individually and collectively place on protecting the environment.

It is very timely now to expand the existing Signpost Demonstration Farm programme, with the individual farmer support service envisaged in the new Signpost Advisory Programme.

I know that Teagasc is setting ambitious targets for farmer participation in this free service, but we need this type of engagement to bring about the change required on Irish farms.

It is great to see Teagasc, ICBF and Bord Bia collaborating in the development of the Digital Sustainability Platform which I am supporting strongly.

Ireland has some excellent databases, which this platform will leverage to build a tool for farmers and advisors to benchmark current emissions on an individual farm and make a plan to reduce these.

So, each farmer will be in a position to; 'Know my Number - Make my Plan'. In time, the platform will also include carbon sequestration in soils, woodlands, forests and hedgerow. This will be a key national resource for the future.

We are also investing in several new Government-led programmes that are focussed on making meaningful improvements in climate and biodiversity targets while also ensuring that we are seeking to enhance farm family incomes.

The recently announced new forestry programme will lead to increased afforestation rates which will play a crucial role in the journey to climate neutrality.

The new €1.3bn National Forestry Programme will be a key enabler and driving positive environmental improvements.

We have delivered an impressive and ambitious new forestry programme that will revolutionise the way we all as farmers, landowners and society interacts with forestry.

Forestry is our ace up the sleeve in meeting our hugely ambitious climate targets.

It will be a key income driver for our farm families and it will help drive a healthy and balanced economy.

We intend to increase premiums for planting trees by between 46% and 66% and to extend the premium period from 15 to 20 years for farmers
What we have now is a new vision for forestry.

The new Organic farming programme has also been announced and this will be an attractive option for many farmers as they adjust their farm businesses. We have increased the funding available for Organics by 500% on the outgoing programme.

The National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory currently being established by Teagasc, which will have 30 eddy Covariance Flux towers to measure CO₂ emissions, or carbon sequestration on peat and mineral soils. This will mean that Ireland will have a higher density of flux towers than any other European country.

We have also supported Teagasc, ICBF and UCD in the purchase of Greenfeed equipment to measure methane emissions from livestock.

These are being used to identify low emitting animals, to assess the impact of feed additives on methane emissions and more accurately establish baseline emission from bovines in an Irish grass-based production system.

This work will be absolutely critical given the central importance of livestock to our agri-food sector.

Physical buildings are also critical, my department is also providing €9m in funding for a €12.7 million upgrade to laboratories and facilities in Teagasc Johnstown Castle, the National Agricultural Sustainability Research and Innovation Centre. This will underpin the research programmes covering climate, water, soils and biodiversity.

We are working to provide Teagasc with additional resources for Climate Action that will support the adoption of new technology and practices on Irish farms and provide robust scientific and technological solutions to lead the agri-food sector towards climate-neutrality by 2050.

The agri-food sector is our largest and most important indigenous sector and is of critical importance to the Irish economy. It is the heartbeat of every rural parish in the country supporting thousands upon thousands of jobs.

Our sector is facing a challenge as we continue on the journey towards becoming even more sustainable.

I am confident that our entire industry is focused on delivering on the three pillars of sustainability – environmental, societal and economic, and this Teagasc strategy will support farmers for climate action.

I am excited to see the rollout of out this exciting initiative by Teagasc as it takes a whole-of-sector approach.

The future is challenging but we must deliver for our farm families, for our sector and for our environment.

Teagasc is mission-critical to our success and I look forward to continuing our excellent working relationship because we are all focused on this ambition.

Thank you