

Tillage groups – asking the awkward questions

Support for new tillage groups is welcome but members will only get the maximum benefit if they participate actively during the meetings

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The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's new Knowledge Transfer measure under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 proposes funding to support tillage farmers and energy crop growers. The scheme is designed to ensure that the farmers and advisor/facilitator engage in group discussion on key aspects of a farmer's business such as crop management, rotations and environmental sustainability with a very strong focus on integrated pest management (IPM).

Up until now, tillage has not been included under the Knowledge Transfer groups and, as a result, will not be subjected to the same criteria as existing livestock groups in having to diversify the groups and create new and varied membership.

Group approach

Experiences and research to date have shown unequivocally that there are significant benefits from attending group meetings. Farmers who

participate in discussion groups farm better and make more money.

Teagasc has been working with groups in the dairy and beef sectors for over 20 years. There is a clear difference between farm businesses which participate in groups and those that do not. Group participants are clearly influenced by visiting their neighbours and peers. They are influenced, often without even noticing it. As a result, they gradually adopt new approaches or make small changes in their businesses. Farmers operating in isolation are more likely to continue with a business-as-usual approach, which can lead to stagnation in output and profitability.

The advisory service takes messages from research and tries to deliver this as practical implementable advice for the farmer. Often the comments include: "That's all fine and well but that would not work on my farm." Such arguments are difficult to make when farmers are hearing it directly from another farmer with personal experience. Higher farm profitability follows from the adoption of modern farm practices.

How it works

Every group will have an approved facilitator (advisor) who will help to prepare a meeting and deal with any issues which may concern a host farmer. The facilitator will set out an agenda and make sure the meeting finishes on time. The facilitator will also present any research or technical data as required and will summarise the topics discussed at the end of the meeting.

Groups generally select a chair who informs the other group members of upcoming meetings. The chair can also be an important conduit, relaying the group's issues to the facilitator. The group should plan out meetings and create a schedule to ensure



maximum participation. Most groups also set out key rules and objectives and decide at the end of each meeting where the next discussion group meeting will take place. Groups, by their nature, start off being somewhat reserved, but experience shows that most groups get very close after a couple of meetings. It's at this stage that effective knowledge transfer occurs.

Requirements

The new programme will run for three years and will follow a similar format to previous discussion group

Farmer's viewpoint

Angus Woods



Angus Woods

Angus Woods who farms 120ha in east Wicklow is a member of the Teagasc East Coast Tillage Discussion Group. His farm includes a suckler-to-beef enterprise, mid-season lamb production, and winter and spring cereals. Angus is an active participant in three different discussion groups: one for beef, one for sheep and one for tillage.

"Seeing is believing," he says. "It's only when group members visit other farms and see what other farmers are doing, that they adopt some of the new things they see." For example, his sheep group was one of the first to see the benefit of rearing triplet lambs on artificial milk. Cost-saving and labour-saving ideas are a common theme to many debates.

Angus believes outside speakers contribute enormously to successful group meetings. "Honest and open discussion and debate is a good thing," says Angus. He strongly feels that farmers shouldn't just sign up to get the €750. He believes that there is an onus on the participants to be receptive to other farmers' ideas.

"We should avoid 50/50 groups," he says. "What I mean is that if 50% of the farmers in the group are genuinely in it to learn and listen to new knowledge, and the other 50% are only in it for the €750, and don't engage in the discussion, then the group doesn't function so well."

Technology uptake is going to be vital in the years ahead. Angus also



Angus Woods has extensive experience of livestock discussion groups and says that the concept will work well for arable farmers providing members engage fully.

commented that a range of personalities within the groups is a good thing. "You always need someone to ask the awkward, or maybe the simple, question that everyone else would like to have asked!"

"Knowledge transfer groups are unquestionably a good thing for your farm business regardless of your mix of enterprises," Angus concludes. "But like most things, you only get the best out of them if you fully engage," he says.

schedules. All participants will also be required, following one to one discussion with the advisor, to complete a tailored farm improvement plan (FIP) including:

- Profit monitor.
- Integrated pest management survey/crop monitoring.
- Nutrient balance.
- Safety statement.

Over the period of the programme, advisers will be required to hold a meeting on health and safety with a recognised expert in attendance. Each participant will be required to attend a minimum of five knowledge

exchange meetings or four meetings and one national event, facilitated by a DAFM-approved advisor.

Payment

Participating farmers will be paid a total of €750 annually for each of the three years they successfully complete. The advisors will be required to spend a total of 12 hours over the period of the programme directly engaging with the farmer in the completion and updating of the FIP. The advisor is responsible for verifying the completion of all aspects of the farmers' participation.

How to apply

Approved advisors will notify the DAFM of the establishment of a group.

The significant change from previous knowledge transfer funded groups such as STAP and BTAP is that advisors' groups will be ranked in the case of oversubscription with advisors only being awarded the number of groups that they qualify for.

If you are interested in getting involved in the new tillage knowledge groups you should contact your advisor immediately to express an interest.