

## organics

# Gathering the pieces of the organic jigsaw

Although there is no indication of when the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) will reopen, prospective organic operators need to be planning now if they are considering making the switch

*“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe” – Abraham Lincoln*

**Dan Clavin**  
Teagasc Organic Specialist, Athenry,  
Teagasc Rural Economy  
Development Programme

**T**his quote describes very well the mindset and planning required by you if you want to successfully convert to organic farming.

This starts with your attitude – you should be convinced that the new system is better than the old one. Are you aware of the changes in production methods, organic regulations and

## KEY FACTS

- Area of land farmed in Ireland: 62,000ha, with approximately 95% in grassland.
- Utilisable agricultural area in organic production (UAA): Ireland 2% v Europe approximately 6%.
- Some 1,800 organic farmers in Ireland (approximately 70% are cattle farmers) including 600 who converted in 2015.
- Organic market in Ireland: €142m (2016), up from €107m (2012). Ireland has the second fastest-growing organic market globally (2016).
- EU organic market is worth €30bn (2015), up from €24bn in 2014. The EU market has doubled in size over the last 10 years.

the financial implications of converting to organic farming? In organics, there are few “quick-fix” solutions, so prospective organic farmers should gather as much information as possible prior to entering conversion.

### What is organic farming?

“Organic farming is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practice, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and products.”

### Steps to successful conversion

Large numbers of farmers continue to attend Teagasc and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) demonstration farm walks. These walks offer an excellent chance to learn, at first hand, the practicalities of organic farming. Many farmers consider themselves to be “almost organic” i.e. using little or no artificial fertilisers.

The reality is that there is no such production system as “almost organic”. However if you spread little or no fertiliser, the transition to organic farming systems is made a little easier – but no artificial fertiliser inputs is only one of the components required to satisfy organic standards.

### Consider

**1** If you can answer “yes” to some or all of these questions, then you should consider switching to organic production.



### Animals

- Is your current stocking rate below two livestock units per hectare?
- Can your animal housing be modified to incorporate a bedded lying area?
- Are you interested in maintaining a very high standard of animal welfare?

### Cereals/horticulture

- Can you incorporate a grass/clover break into your rotation?
- Do you have a source of farmyard manure/slurry/compost on or near your own farm?
- Are you interested in achieving gross margins of €1,000/ha for cereal production?

### Investigate

**2** Get acquainted with the adjustments required by attending farm walk(s), talking to other organic farmers and or contacting a local advisor.

Familiarise yourself with the





Gross margins of €1,000/ha (excluding the organic scheme) are achievable from growing organic cereals.

organic standards. A major factor distinguishing organic farming from other approaches to sustainable farming is the existence of internationally acknowledged standards and certification procedures. These standards have been developed to provide organic producers with consistent, clear rules as to how organic food should be produced. A two-year conversion period is required before a farm is given organic status.

Some of the main requirements are listed below.

#### Fertilisers and chemicals

- Soluble mineral fertilisers are prohibited, but products such as lime and ground rock phosphate and sulphate of potash are permitted.
- Clover and other legumes supply nitrogen. The balance between fertility building crops, such as a grass/clover ley and exploitative crops such as cereals and potatoes is critical in a tillage rotation.
- Most manufactured agro-chemicals (e.g. chemical herbicides, pesticides, insecticides) are prohibited. Pests,

diseases and weeds are controlled by planting disease resistant varieties, mechanical weeding and false/stale seedbed techniques.

#### Animal welfare

- The highest standards of animal welfare are obligatory. Bedding, good ventilation and generous floor space are required for housed animals.
- Castration, debudding and tail docking require prior permission from the Organic Certification Body (OCB).
- Routine administration of veterinary treatments to animals is not allowed, with the emphasis on prevention rather than cure. Withdrawal periods for permitted veterinary products may need to be doubled or tripled prior to the animal entering the food chain.

#### Explore market opportunities

- For organic farming to be profitable, a premium price must be achieved for the produce you sell.
- Beef and sheep farmers interested in organic conversion should speak with other organic farmers and

processors about potential markets for store and/or finished animals. Up to 20 mart days, selling exclusively organic stock, now run nationwide.

- Strong market demand and lack of supply exists in a number of sectors including tillage, horticulture and dairying.

### Organic certification

**3** The Organic Certification Bodies (OCBs) provide an inspection and certification service for all organic production units in Ireland. They have been designated and are regulated by the Organic Unit of DAFM and are responsible for upholding the organic standards as defined by the EU.

The OCB will send you an information pack on request. The pack is tailored to your needs and will generally contain information on the application and conversion process, an application form and a guide to the organic standards.

If you decide to apply, a representative from the OCB will carry out an



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initial inspection and further annual inspections of your holding to check that you are in compliance with the standards. Further information can be sourced from the following OCBs:

- IOFGA (Irish Organic Farmers and Growers Association), 16A Inish Carraig, Golden Island, Athlone, Co Westmeath. Tel: 090-6433 680. Email: [info@iofga.org](mailto:info@iofga.org) | Web: [www.iofga.org](http://www.iofga.org)
- Organic Trust, 2 Vernon Avenue, Clontarf, Dublin 3 Tel: 01-853 0271. Email: [organic@iol.ie](mailto:organic@iol.ie) | Web: [www.organictrust.ie](http://www.organictrust.ie)

## FETAC course

**4** A 25-hour introduction to organic production course must be completed before acceptance into the DAFM Organic Farming Scheme. Teagasc will run organic courses this spring and summer at Athenry, Macroom and Portlaoise (see details below). The course, which includes farm walks, is an excellent way of ensuring that you make an informed decision before going organic.

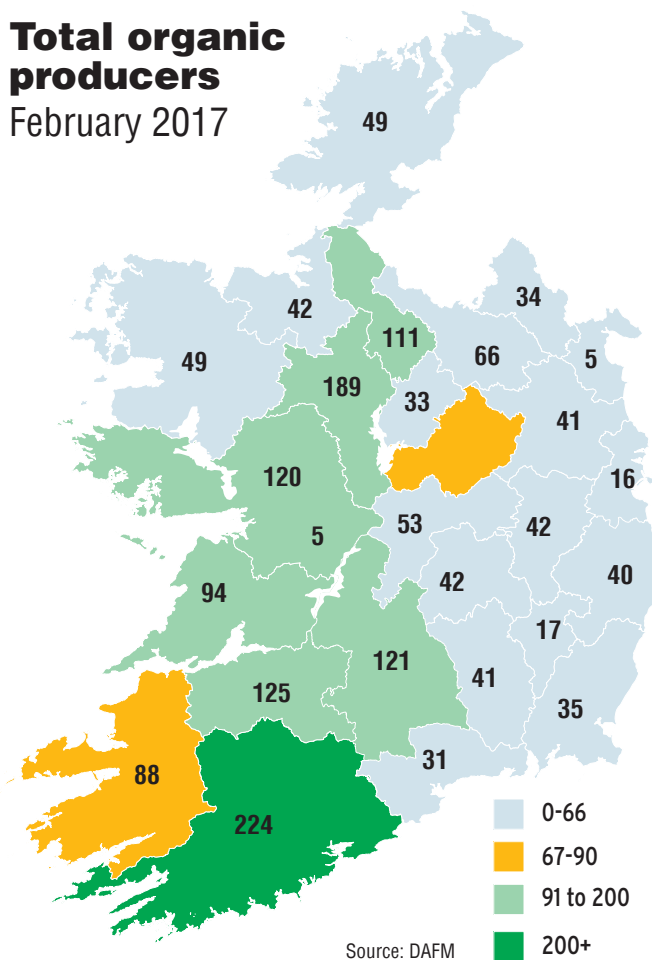
## Make an application to the OFS

**5** Details of the reopening of the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) have yet to be announced. Check [www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/organicfarming](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/organicfarming) for updates and further details.

## The conversion process

**6** During the conversion period (typically two years) the enterprise must adhere to organic standards. After the period expires, the OCB issues full organic status to the farm, which allows the farmer to sell his/her produce as organic.

## Total organic producers February 2017



## Schedule of FETAC Level 5 organic courses

FETAC Level 5 introduction to organic farming – four-day course

Location	Course dates	Times
Teagasc office, Codrum, Macroom	Tues 16 May Tues 23 May Tues 30 May Tues 6 June	10am to 5pm
Teagasc office, Athenry	Friday 19 May Thursday 1 June Wednesday 7 June Friday 16 June	9.30am to 4.30pm
Teagasc office, 1 Park Villas, Portlaoise	Thurs 24 Aug Thurs 31 Aug Thurs 7 Aug Thurs 14 Sept	10am to 5pm

Include farm walks. Course fee €220. Pre-booking essential. See <https://www.teagasc.ie/rural-economy/organics/training/>

## Schedule of Teagasc/DAFM organic demo farm walks

### MAY

Wednesday 10 May @ 4pm	Monaghan	Mark Gillanders, Ballinagall, Monaghan	Suckler to beef and cereals
Thursday 25 May @ 4pm	Limerick	Harry O'Grady, Finnitterstown Hse, Adare, Co Limerick	Suckler-to-beef farm diversification

### JUNE

Thursday 22 June @ 6pm	Cork	Stuart and Jean Kingston, Upper Forrest Farm, Farnanes, Co Cork	Beef, cereals and potatoes
Thursday 29 June @ 2pm	Cork	Rory Magorrian, Kildinan Farm, Ballyhooley, Co Cork	Horticulture, salads and direct sales

### JULY

Wednesday 5 July @ 2pm	Galway	Kenneth Keavey, Green Earth Organics Farm, Caherlea, Corrandulla, Co Galway	Horticulture and direct sales; box scheme, online and farm shop
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For more information and directions to farm walks: [www.teagasc.ie/events](http://www.teagasc.ie/events)