

# Co-operation in farming

The farmer and the cow man can be friends... rather than compete for land, these farmers co-operate

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Tillage farmer Tommy Prendergast and his family run a successful farming and agricultural contracting company based in Dangan, Golden, Cashel, Co Tipperary, focused on providing a high-quality service and customer satisfaction to the local farming community.

Tommy grows a range of crops from porridge oats to malting barley, as well as feed wheat and barley and, increasingly, fodder crops such as maize for the increasing cow numbers in the area.

The contracting business has equipped Tommy with a reliable supply of customers who trust him to deliver a quality product. "The relationship we have with our farmers and suppliers is of utmost importance to us. It's vital to be approachable and give each customer personal atten-

tion and ensure their expectations are met," says Tommy.

## Straw

The tillage area in Ireland has reduced by 14% since 2012 and this trend is expected to continue. Again, having good relationships with his customers has allowed Tommy to develop a straw business based on mutually benefit. "The straw produced on the farm is supplied to local farmers many of whom return the straw as farmyard manure," says Tommy.

## Maize

Maize silage can be used across a range of farm enterprises including buffer feeding in spring herds, winter milk production systems and beef production systems. A benefit for Tommy is that maize provides him with a valuable break crop on his farm. Research from Teagasc indicates the winter wheat following a break crop can increase the yield of the following wheat crop by 1.5t/ha over continuous cropping.

Many farmers will pay Tommy by the tonne for maize but dairy farmer Michael Kennedy from Knockroe, Cashel has worked closely with the Prendergasts for years has his own arrangement. "I pay Tommy a set charge per acre to grow maize and ensile it for me," says Michael. This relationship involves a high degree of trust as Michael does not know



William Prendergast, dairy farmer  
Michael Kennedy from Knockroe,  
Cashel, Tommy Prendergast, Conor  
Kavanagh and Gary Prendergast.

precisely how many tonnes he will get. "We will discuss the crop through the year," says Tommy.

"Michael shares some of the risk and yield will vary a bit from season to season. If you're being paid per acre grown it's important to try achieve not only maximum yield but also top-quality product for the farmers as repeat business is key to the success of growing fodder crops for other farmers."

Growing maize for intensive livestock farmers in the area, who often have to export organic manures in order to comply with the nitrates directive gives Tommy access to valuable organic manure which he can return to the fields.

When asked about the value of organic manure sources, Tommy replied that: "Organic manures such as cattle and pig slurry, farmyard manure and compost are only as valuable as the chemical fertiliser that

can be saved by using them. If you are importing organic manures without making adjustments to chemical fertiliser applications, then the organic manures will not be saving you any money. The use of organic manures can dramatically reduce costs and leave your soils in a better condition."

Many tillage soils are index 1 and 2 for both P and K. A recent trial conducted at Oak Park Research Centre on winter wheat showed that a P index 3 soil yields 1.5t/ha more grain than a P index 1 soil.

Tillage farmers getting high yields have high offtakes of P and K from their land. Each tonne of grain removes 3.8kg P and 10kg K.

"It's absolutely vital fields that are under continuous tillage are treated right, the application of organic manure really puts the heart back into the soil," says Tommy.

Along with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium benefits (Table 1),

slurry is a valuable source of organic matter. Improving soil organic matter will increase aggregate stability, reduce susceptibility to compaction and soil erosion. Nutrient leaching is reduced and soil fertility is increased through improved nutrient availability.

Tommy feels that organic manure can play an important role when it comes to fertiliser application in spring. Having an up-to-date fertiliser plan will allow you to project your ability to import organic manure during the year. "Having up-to-date soil sample results is essential for accurate planning and can also help reduce fertiliser costs," he says.

With good planning and mutual trust livestock and tillage farmers can work together to ensure expansion can continue and costs can be saved and, most importantly, soils and the environment benefit too.

## Stakeholder group

An industry stakeholder group was formed in 2015 to discuss the most up-to-date information on the agronomy, quality, feeding of maize silage and farm to farm contracts. The result of this stakeholder group was the production of the *Maize Guide*, which was launched at the Teagasc tillage conference in 2017. The maize guide can be accessed at <https://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2017/The-Maize-Guide.pdf>.

“A base price is agreed and this is adjusted up or down depending on starch and DM result

The group identified the need for written contracts versus the current standard gentleman's agreement. A gentleman's agreement relies on huge level of trust between the grower and the end user, which is something Tommy has achieved with his customer base. The maize guide contracts are more secure for both newer growers and purchasers.

The maize guide contracts are based on:

- Yield and quality.
- A base price is agreed and this is adjusted up or down depending on starch and DM result.
- Third-party adjudicator is important from both grower and purchaser perspective.

Traditionally, maize and fodder beet are the most common forage crops grown by tillage farmers for livestock farms but wholecrop wheat and barley and the grazing of catch crops are options. Another option is grass, grass grown on tillage farms can be utilised for silage, grazing or zero grazing.

**Table 1:** Available N, P and K values for a range of organic manures

| Manure type                    | Units/1,000 gallons |     |    |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-----|----|
|                                | N                   | P   | K  |
| Cattle slurry (7% DM)          | 6                   | 5   | 32 |
| Dilute cattle slurry (3.5% DM) | 5                   | 3   | 15 |
| Pig slurry (4% DM)             | 19                  | 7   | 20 |
| Units/tonne                    |                     |     |    |
| FYM                            | 3                   | 2.4 | 12 |
| SMC                            | 3                   | 3   | 16 |
| Poultry manures                |                     |     |    |
| Broiler/deep litter            | 14                  | 12  | 36 |
| Layers (30% DM)                | 13.7                | 5.8 | 12 |
| Layers (55% DM)                | 23                  | 11  | 24 |
| Turkey                         | 28                  | 28  | 18 |

Mark Plunkett, 2018