

Sustainable dairy farming

John J McNamara
Teagasc Clonakilty

"My attitude to environmentally friendly farming methods has evolved over the years," says Cormac O'Keeffe (pictured right). "I rejected the REPS scheme because I felt it would restrict my farming, but since then I have become more aware of the importance of sustainable farming through my own reading and the Carbery Green Dairy Programme."

Cormac and his wife Clodagh farm at Courleigh, Clonakilty, in west Cork with their children James, Laoise and Eoghan. They milked 128 cows in 2018. Cormac has been a member of the Carbery Green Dairy farmer group since it was started in 2010 by Sinead Treanor of Carbery. He's also a member of the Clonakilty discussion group facilitated by his Teagasc advisor Mark Treacy.

In 2018, Cormac completed a diploma in environmental science and social policy in UCC. He puts theory into practice and started planting native species hedgerows in 2011.

"At the start, I planted them beside the fence wire and did not protect them from stock. The cows loved to prune the soft new growth of the whitethorns. I changed to fencing either side of the saplings until they had established themselves well.

"You have to prune back the whitethorn saplings hard in their first few years.

This goes against one's instinct when they are so small, but it does lead to sturdier, denser, hedges, as there will be lots of side branches close to the ground.

"I have a small wood which has sycamore trees and these produce an abundance of free saplings which I transplant into the new hedge rows each autumn."

Cormac has left a corner of the farm, which he always had his eye on to drain, untouched. He says John Finn of Teagasc was the instigator.

"John said at an event which I attended 'think twice before you go reclaiming the difficult area; is it really worth all the cost of making it productive? Especially when it can



add so much to the biodiversity on your farm by leaving it and protecting it'.

"It is a low-lying piece with poor outfall. I left it alone and now there are ducks and other wildlife on the small pond. Not having it in grass for a few months of the year is a small sacrifice.

"I stopped spraying under the wires around ditches a number of years ago," says Cormac. "I did not like the sterile look that resulted. I drop the wires and get a hedge cutter in to trim the ditches as required.

"I am looking at moving the fence wire back from these ditches so that the cows can still graze right up to

the ditch, but it will make trimming the ditch with the hedge cutter easier. I changed fences too and have a fence that will burn any vegetation that comes in contact with it and therefore not loose shock by getting earthed.

"There is no conflict between profitable farming and taking care of the environment for future generations," he concludes.

"We can't wait for others to take action. We have to do it ourselves and every little bit counts."

Dairy performance figures 2018

Average cows	128
Litres produced/cow	6624
Fat %	4.22%
Protein %	3.70%
Kg/milk solids/cow	511kg
Six-week calving	86%
Farm stocking rate	2.61 LU/ha