

organic farming

Making the conversion from tillage to organic

Prior to converting to organic production, Tipperary farmers Ross and Amy Jackson operated a predominantly tillage farm with a cattle system

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Five years ago, Ross and Amy Jackson farming in Lacka, Carrig, Co Tipperary, embarked on a journey, which has taken their farm business from a conventional tillage and beef enterprise to a fully organic cereal, sheep and cattle business. “When we entered organic conversion, we had a five-year plan and we have just got to where wanted to be at this stage,” says Amy.

Prior to converting to organic production, it was predominantly a tillage farm with a cattle system which consisted of buying store cattle in the autumn and finishing over the winter months. On the farm today is a cereal enterprise of malting barley and spring oats. There is also a sheep enterprise with 125 ewes and a cattle enterprise where organic cattle are bought, grazed for the summer and sold in autumn.

The couple describe themselves as part-time farmers, with Ross working as an agricultural consultant and Amy working in nearby Gurteen College.

Ross's brother converted his farm to an organic system. “Observing how that went we became very interested in organic farming as an option for ourselves,” says Ross. “We both liked the idea of reducing the amount of chemicals being used on the farm and also the challenge of an organic farming system.

“We also believed there was potential to increase farm profits,” says

Ross. Amy, having experience working with sheep, was very interested to mix the two enterprises of sheep and tillage in an organic system.

After careful consideration, the farm entered conversion in 2015 with full organic status for the land and produce being achieved in 2017.

Changes on the farm

When the farm entered organic conversion in 2015, a number of changes were made:

- Between 2015 and 2016, the entire farm was reseeded. This was to build soil fertility allowing cereals to be grown once full organic status was achieved.
- In the first two years, cattle were housed over the winter and finished off grass over the summer. A sheep enterprise was introduced and built up to a flock of 125 ewes.
- In May 2016, a herbal ley mixture was sown. The herbal ley contains a diverse range of grasses, herbs and clovers. Its aim is to produce well-balanced forage and not just large volumes of grass. It does not demand high fertiliser inputs and is therefore ideally suited to organic farming. It is being used to finish lambs
- Initial fencing, farm roadways and water were put in at a cost of approximately €15,000. A further investment of €40,000 was made between 2017 and 2019 on fencing, which was grant-aided through the Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine TAMS at a rate of 60%.

Growing organic cereals

“There is strong demand for organic cereals both for livestock and human



consumption and potential to make a good financial return,” says Ross.

“Coming from a tillage background weed control was my greatest concern, but you can manage that.”

In 2019, there were 22ha of land devoted to cereals. This was made up of spring oats and spring malting barley with a small area of lupins and oats being grown.

“The malting barley is grown on contract for the organic distilling market as an organic single farm distillation for Waterford Distillery and spring oats is grown on contract for Flahavan's organic porridge market,” adds Ross.

Lupins with oats were grown last year as a trial for feed for the sheep. In 2019, the oat crop yielded 2.2t/ac and the price achieved was €350/t, while the malting barley crop yielded 2t/ac and the price achieved was €472/t.

Crop rotation

“We follow a rotation of a two- to three -year fertility building phase followed by two to three years of cereals and then back to a grass/ clover ley. The rotation provides the principal mechanism to provide crop



Ross and Amy Jackson run a sheep flock with 125 mature ewes, 20 ewe lambs and five rams in Lacka, Carrig, Co Tipperary.

Figure 1
Jacksons' land use (2019)

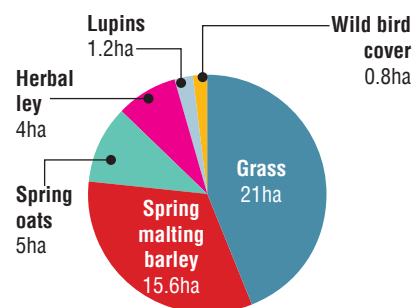


Table 1: Estimated cost per acre of growing the malting barley crop on the Jacksons farm in 2019

	€/ac
Materials	
Seed	59
Fertiliser	37
Hire machinery	
Manure spreading	20
Fertiliser spreading	5
Plough, one-pass and rolling	76
Harvesting	49
Miscellaneous	
Interest (6%)	6
Total variable costs	252

nutrients and is a major way to control pests/diseases.

“This is our planned rotation but it may vary depending on soil type, weed burden and fertility. The plan is to have a winter grazing forage between cereal crops to provide winter grazing for the sheep.

“After the cereal harvest, a winter forage crop is broadcast; the seed mixture includes vetch, radish, buckwheat, forage rape and turnip. This is grazed by the sheep from late November onwards.

Sheep enterprise

Amy, not from a farming background, credits her godmother, who manages a 1,200-head lowland flock in Northumberland, with influencing her interest and love of farming. Amy “always looked up to her” and spent a lot of her younger years helping out on the farm, mainly at lambing time. Amy went on to study environmental management at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne.

“I actually like keeping records,” says Amy, who keeps details on lambs from the time they are born right through until they are sold. Her interest and attention to detail is very evi-

dent and all management practices of the system are recorded which Amy then uses to help make future plans for the development of the flock.

The sheep flock consists of 125 mature ewes and 20 ewe lambs with five rams. The aim is to operate a closed flock, only buying in rams. The breeds of rams presently on the farm are Charollais and Border Leicester. The ewe flock is made up of Suffolk cross, Texel cross, Scotch/Blackface cross and homebred Border Leicester crosses.

“The majority of lambs are sold from mid-June to mid-November,” says Amy. The carcass weight varies from 20kg to 23kg depending on the time of the year. All lambs are sold through the Offaly Quality Lamb Producer Group to Irish Country Meats (ICM) based in Camolin, Co Wexford, with the majority going into the organic market at a premium price of 15% above conventional price base price.

Cattle enterprise

Cattle are no longer wintered on the farm. In 2019, organic store cattle were bought in the spring grazed for the summer and then sold to the or-

ganic processor and another organic livestock farmer.

Performance of the farm

The Jacksons aim to maintain a good level of production while minimising the costs of production.

They do all their own ploughing, tilling, sowing, harvesting and silage making. Their aim is to achieve a premium price for all that is produced on the farm. They have made good use of DAFM grant and scheme support.

Future plans

Ross and Amy’s farm is one of 12 organic farms in the 2019-2020 Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine (DAFM)/Teagasc organic demonstration farm programme, which showcases successful organic producers of various enterprises.

Their farm walk will take place on Wednesday 24 June 2020 at 2pm.

Over the next five years, they plan to make further investments in infrastructure and experiment with different crops, “while keeping an eye on the market and looking out for more market opportunities”.